Mitigating moral emotions after crises: A reconceptualization of organizational responses

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Abstract

Crises evoke a broad palette of negative moral emotions. However, past research has almost exclusively investigated anger. Building on insights from constructivist and social-functionalist theories of emotions, this conceptual article develops an account of how anger, disgust and contempt influence evaluators' responses to crises and conceptualizes the organizational responses that mitigate each of these emotions. While anger focuses attention on the transgression itself, contempt and disgust are associated, respectively, with broader concerns about the transgressor's competence and moral character. Consequently, to mitigate negative emotions other than anger, organizational response strategies should do more than merely match attributions of situational responsibility. By matching the response strategy's attention focus (on the transgression *versus* the transgressor) and interpretation focus (on harm *versus* moral character *versus* competence) with the evaluators' emotions, organizations can attempt to mitigate combinations of anger, disgust and contempt. This paper shows that, while strategies attempting to mitigate anger aim primarily to improve perceptions of the crisis, responses to disgust and contempt aim to shift the perception of the transgressing organization. The paper extends our understanding of crisis management by exploring the role of discrete emotions, by extending the notion of *matching* as a key mechanism to mitigate evaluators' negative emotions, and by examining how organizations should respond to the specific threat posed by distinct negative emotions.

Keywords: crisis management, crisis response, crisis communications, moral emotions, moral transgression

Introduction

Over the last decade, external evaluators' responses to organizational crises have attracted much attention (e.g. Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Ham & Kim, 2019; Raithel & Hock, 2021). A crisis is an 'unexpected, publicly known, and harmful event that has high levels of initial uncertainty, interferes with the normal operations of an organization, and generates widespread, intuitive, and negative perceptions among evaluators' (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015, p. 345). Crises often have moral implications, since evaluators assess wrongdoing with harmful implications for the relevant stakeholders (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). Research from multiple disciplinary traditions shows that evaluators' responses to crises are modulated by negative moral emotions (Bachmann et al., 2015; Coombs & Tachkova, 2022; Fetscherin, 2019; Lindebaum et al., 2017; Maitlis et al., 2013; Varma, 2021). From BP's *Horizon* oil spill to the Boeing 747 MAX's crashes, the past decade has seen a range of large-scale crises that have sparked intense emotions of public condemnation. Emotions are even more important at the onset of crises, when evaluators' information processing is predominantly affect-laden (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Clark & Li, 2023).

The existing literature focuses on anger as the main or only emotion evaluators experience (Coombs, 2007; Khamitov et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2006). Furthermore, the existing literature focuses on emotions' ability to energise individual and collective behaviour (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016; Khamitov et al., 2020), while largely neglecting the role that emotions might play in shaping how evaluators interpret complex information in the aftermath of a crisis. This research gap is important for two reasons. First, during crises, evaluators experience a wide range of negative moral emotions besides anger (Fetscherin, 2019; Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). Second, research in social psychology shows that emotions have important functions that go beyond their direct influence on behaviour: emotions are associated with shared meanings and

patterns of cognitive information that influence how people make sense of disruptive events like crises (Barrett et al., 2007; Haidt, 2003; Lindquist, 2013).

An implication of focusing on anger, has also been the focus on attributions of situational responsibility (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Coombs, 1995), since anger is deeply implicated in them (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Hutcherson & Gross, 2011; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). Current research suggests that organizational response strategies should match evaluators' attributions of situational responsibility (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Maitlis et al., 2013; Raithel & Hock, 2021). Organizations to which evaluators attribute responsibility should provide accommodative responses, accepting responsibility and providing reparations. In contrast, organizations to which evaluators do not attribute responsibility, as in accidental crises or crises caused by other actors, are better served by rejecting responsibility through defensive responses such as denial or blame shifting (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Coombs, 1995). According to this logic, response strategies are successful when they conform to, or match, evaluators' sensemaking (Raithel & Hock, 2021). Current theory, however, does not account for other negative emotions: unlike anger, these might focus evaluators' attention on something other than responsibility. Negative emotions of moral condemnation, such as contempt and disgust, concern wrongdoers' character more than their responsibility (Haidt, 2003; Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). Current research lacks a clear account of how such emotions might be mitigated.

To address these limitations, we advance a theory about the negative moral emotions that evaluators experience when making sense of crises, and about the response strategies that can mitigate them. Integrating insights from constructivist and social-functionalist theories of emotions, we conceptualize anger, contempt and disgust as three emotion schemata. These emerge from evaluators' embodied experience of crises (Schein & Gray, 2018). While the literature has addressed other negative emotions, such as moral outrage (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2018), or configurations of negative emotions, such as hate (Fetscherin, 2019), we focus here

on anger, contempt and disgust, as a significant amount of research has directly compared them (Haidt, 2003; Hutcherson & Gross, 2011; Molho et al., 2017). We build on this evidence to construct a theory of how these three emotion schemata influence evaluators' responses; we then explore how organizational strategies can mitigate these different damaging emotions. As schemata that influence how evaluators make sense of crises, these are moral emotions that imply different accounts of norm violation and harm, and different courses of action for evaluators (Cameron et al., 2015). Consequently, different emotions require different response strategies to mitigate them.

We focus on external evaluators or observers of a given crisis without a close connection to the organization. This assumption is common in existing literature (Coombs, 1995; Raithel & Hock, 2021), and necessary given our conceptual task. To simplify the social context under analysis, we will exclusively consider interactions between evaluators and organizational responses at crisis onset (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015), abstracting from broader considerations of any social or organizational contexts and actors that might further influence evaluators' responses (e.g. media, NGOs, regulatory bodies, past perceptions of the organization). Our approach integrates two theories of emotions from social psychology that, while acknowledging emotions' socio-cultural role, remain primarily concerned with intrapersonal processes. We thus focus on micro-level interactions between individual evaluators and their processing of organizational strategies.

We propose that anger, contempt and disgust perform distinct social roles in responses to crises. Anger directs evaluators' attention to the transgression and can be mitigated by responses that match their situational attributions of the crisis (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Coombs, 1995; Maitlis et al., 2013; Raithel & Hock, 2021). Disgust and contempt instead direct evaluators' attention to the transgressor: disgust focuses on moral character, contempt on competence (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011; Molho et al., 2017). Responses that focus exclusively on the

transgression, attempting to shape attributions of situational responsibility (Raithel & Hock, 2021), will be unable to mitigate emotions that focus on the transgressor. In addition to expanding current understanding of the negative moral emotions that can modulate evaluators' responses to a crisis, we also extend research on organizational response strategies. We demonstrate the importance of matching a broader range of evaluators' experiences, going beyond the attributions of situational responsibility for transgressions that characterise existing research.

We begin by introducing a novel perspective to understand the role of negative moral emotions in the aftermath of a crisis. This approach is based on a constructivist view of emotions (Barrett, 2006; Lindquist, 2013) and advances a novel mechanism for mitigating negative emotions. We then leverage evidence from social-functionalist theories of emotion, conceptualizing anger, disgust and contempt as three emotion schemata that might emerge after a crisis. Next, we reconceptualize organizational response strategies according to their expected ability to mitigate anger, disgust and contempt. We then illustrate our theory through an examination of the BP *Horizon* oil spill crisis. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and managerial implications of our analysis.

A constructivist view of emotions after organizational crises

Past research on evaluators' responses to crises has considered the impact of various emotions (Khamitov et al., 2020; Valor et al., 2022). This literature has been significantly influenced by theories from social psychology that see emotions as 'real' or 'natural' kinds. Many approaches share these assumptions; despite their differences, they all imply that each emotion is associated with specific elicitors, has specific phenomenological characteristics, and primarily aims to drive specific behavioural patterns (Barrett, 2006). In this tradition, emotion categories are discrete physiological and phenomenological responses that directly correspond

to specific behaviours (Barrett, 2012). In this view, moral emotions result from a set of spontaneous appraisals (e.g. harm, blame, unethicality and intentionality) (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016). In turn, moral emotions energise negative responses, fuelling a desire to punish the wrongdoer (Kähr et al., 2016). This view of emotions as energising is found across studies examining different emotions, such as anger (Valor et al., 2022), disgust (Fetscherein, 2019), contempt (Romani et al., 2013) or a combination of them (Xie & Bagozzi, 2019).

A contrasting approach questions this tight and linear relationship between the elicitors, cognitions and actions linked with discrete emotions (Cameron et al., 2015). Constructivist theories argue that an experience of discrete emotions results from the psychological categorisation of bodily feelings: experiencing an emotion is an act of meaning-making (Lindquist, 2013), in which emotions and cognitions fuse in a gestalt (Barrett, 2006). Three basic elements make up this process: core affect, situational knowledge and conceptual knowledge of emotions. Core affect is the ongoing stream of changes in neurophysiological states in response to changing internal or external events (Barrett et al., 2007; Lindquist, 2013). Core affect is experienced as pleasant or unpleasant, and as arousing or quieting (Barrett et al., 2007). Changes in core affect signal potential levers or threats to our goals or well-being (Barrett, 2006).

Emotions emerge when individuals interpret these changes in their core affect (Barrett et al., 2007: Lindquist, 2013), drawing both from conceptual knowledge of emotions (e.g. cultural knowledge of emotions, past experiences of emotions) and from situational knowledge (e.g. news of the crisis and organizational responses to it) (Barrett et al., 2007). Consequently, any experience of discrete emotions is an act of situated conceptualization (Barrett, 2014): the interpretation of changes in core affect is attuned to the situation and prepares the individual for situated action (Barrett, 2014). Constructivist theories accept that conceptual representations and changes in core affect co-occur and mutually affect one another (Lindquist, 2013).

In this view, the individual constructs the experience of an emotion through the combinatorial processes (Cameron et al., 2015; Gray et al., 2017) of core affect, conceptual knowledge and situational knowledge. Because evaluators experience changes in core affect and mobilise distinct knowledge bases differently (Barrett et al., 2007), their accounts of the crisis and actions during it may also differ (Barrett, 2014); this may account for heterogeneity in evaluators' crisis perception. Yet, even accepting that embodied experience of emotions is rich and flexible, emotion categories – e.g. joy, guilt or disgust – have cultural stability, since they operate as 'collective cognitive tools' (Barrett, 2012, p. 420): mental representations, shared by the members of a collective and serving as guidelines for moral evaluators' judgements and actions. In the constructivist view, variability in emotion experience is a natural outcome of the combinatorial processes that explain an emotion's emergence. Discrete emotions belong either to a primary category (e.g. anger) or to a cluster of closely associated feelings that are culturally linked to the emotion prototype (e.g. irritation, frustration) (Russell & Fehr, 1994). Individuals' heterogeneity in responses is therefore regulated by shared social and cultural norms that determine each emotion's acceptability in different situations (Barrett, 2012). This implies that the judgements and actions associated with a discrete emotion (McManus, 2021) are not intrinsic to the bodily feelings one experiences; rather, they have been socially constructed and reflect collective intentionality (Barrett, 2012). Applied to moral emotions, this understanding integrates the intrapsychic, relational and contextual levels that shape ethical decision-making (Islam, 2020), as emotions are understood as an intersection of these three influences.

Table 1, below, summarises the key differences between the natural-kind view and the constructivist view of emotions in social psychology. These views can be interpreted as the ends of a continuum. Several approaches adopt intermediate stances, depending on how they conceptualize the emergence of emotion (e.g. Barrett, 2014) and on how central to emotional

experiences they take cognition to be (e.g. Izard, 2007). What matters for our purposes is that the dominant accounts of emotions' role in evaluators' responses to crises have tended to assume that emotions are natural kinds.

<div align="center">INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE</div>

Moral emotions, evaluators' responses and emotion mitigation in organizational crises

A novel approach to emotion mitigation

Figure 1 presents an overall approach to the study of negative moral emotions and how organizational strategies can mitigate them. This approach is consistent with constructivist theories of emotions. It suggests that, to mitigate emotions, organizations can influence the process of emotion construction using strategies that significantly shift situational knowledge (Barrett et al., 2007: Lindquist, 2013). During organizational crises, emotions emerge when evaluators are exposed to negative information portraying the crisis. What causes evaluators to experience a given emotion is a combination of bodily feelings, cultural knowledge of emotions and situational knowledge pertaining to the crisis. Organizational responses can mitigate negative emotions by providing new information that influences the categorisation of emotions.

Furthermore, in a constructivist approach, emotions do not just drive behaviours but have broader implications for how evaluators make sense of crises. Emotions influence social cognition, social learning and socio-cultural morality (Barrett et al., 2007; Haidt, 2003; Lindquist, 2013), playing a critical role in activating the meanings, interpretations and social judgements that guide evaluators' interpretation of the crisis. To conceptualize this role, we leverage the concept of emotion schemata (Cristofaro, 2022; Izard, 2007). Emerging during emotion categorisation, an emotion schema contains the set of meanings, beliefs and judgments associated with a discrete emotion (Barrett, 2014; Izard, 2007).

Discrete moral emotions act as distinct schemata for crisis understanding and response (Cristofaro, 2022). Anger, disgust and contempt are all other-condemning emotions which function as guardians of the moral order, but social-functionalist theories of moral emotions have provided a comprehensive account of how they differ (Haidt, 2003), distinguishing them along three dimensions: (1) attention focus, (2) interpretation focus and (3) preparation for specific actions from the evaluator (Haidt, 2003; Hutcherson & Gross, 2011; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). Regarding the first dimension, scholars show that anger directs attention to the transgression, including the causes and consequences of the negative event, whereas disgust and contempt involve more general considerations about the transgressor (Haidt, 2003). The interpretation of moral transgressions refers to the specific domain or moral concern associated with it; evidence suggests that, while anger focuses on harm, disgust is associated with concerns about moral character and contempt focuses on competence (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Hutcherson & Gross, 2011; McManus, 2021; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). Finally, each emotion prepares the person experiencing it for different behaviour: anger is more closely associated with direct aggression and seeking redress, while contempt and disgust are linked with social avoidance and exclusion (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; McManus, 2021; Molho et al., 2017). Adopting the social-functionalist view of the differences between anger, contempt and disgust, we integrate it with a constructivist view of emotions to develop our own account of moral emotions' influence on how evaluators make sense of organizational crises.

Figure 1 further shows how emotion construction and the activation of emotion schemata influence the stable, long-term evaluation of an organization. We therefore propose that the activation of emotion schemata, as part of the relatively transient and short-lived processes of emotion construction and experience, contributes to shaping stable evaluations of the organization. While the process leading to the emergence of such stable evaluations is complex and beyond the focus of this article, research shows that crises can lead to a stable negative

evaluation of an organization's moral legitimacy (Hampel & Tracey, 2019; Hudson, 2008). When socially shared, such negative evaluations can gradually become collective evaluations that are associated with a range of negative organizational outcomes (Pollock et al., 2019; Tost, 2011). At the negative end of the spectrum, evaluations of moral illegitimacy can cause an organization to be stigmatised. A stigmatised organization is seen as deeply flawed and discredited, leading to generalised aversion from relevant stakeholders (Devers et al., 2009; Hampel & Tracey, 2019).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Anger, contempt and disgust as moral emotion schemata

Research adopting a social-functionalist approach has produced evidence of the differences between anger, disgust and contempt. Such differences are reflected in their emotion schemata, which influence evaluators' responses to crises. Next, we review the evidence specific to each emotion.

Anger is associated with arousing bodily responses, such as increased heart rate (Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). Anger involves a more conscious and more extensive processing of situational cues than disgust or contempt (Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013), and is linked to the inference that rights or property have been harmed, notably when the victim of harm is the self or others close to the self (Haidt, 2003; Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). Anger is also linked with certain norm violations: those concerning fairness, justice or reciprocity (Greenbaum et al., 2020). A key characteristic of the anger schema is that it directs attention to the transgression rather than the transgressor and thus situational responsibility is inherent to this schema (Katzir et al., 2019; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). Its main social function is to establish the involvement of the transgressor in the event (Haidt, 2003) and repair the appraised harm (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). It predisposes evaluators to aggression or punishment, seeking

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redress rather than revenge (Haidt, 2003); when the harm is eliminated or repaired, anger recedes, since its situational nature implies a weak association with evaluations of the perpetrator's character (Fischer & Roseman, 2007).

Disgust is linked with bodily sensations of distaste (Izard, 1993) and a deceleration in heart rate (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). A disgust schema centres the interpretation on the transgressor (Haidt, 2003). Disgust essentialises the transgressor by conveying a belief that the transgressor possesses an inherent, unchangeable and stable character that is despicable (Katzir et al., 2019; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). In contrast, anger implies that the transgressor's action is immoral, but not necessarily that the transgressor has a malicious character (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). Unlike anger, disgust implies that the transgressor is tainted and stigmatised in the eyes of others (Greenbaum et al., 2020; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). Disgust mobilises the idea of a corrupt moral character: transgressors, it suggests, are likely to disregard moral norms in the future (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2018). Hence, disgust has a strong associative nature which explains the stigma (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2018): if the transgression is disgusting, so too is the transgressor (Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). Disgust also differs from anger in its behavioural implications: it makes evaluators prone to distancing themselves from transgressors, ostracising them or engaging in purifying or cleansing actions (Fetscherein, 2019; Haidt, 2003; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). Finally, disgust is more intuitive and automatic than anger, and less subject to deliberation or circumstantial consideration (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2018).

Contempt is associated with cold bodily responses (Izard, 1993). Like disgust, it orients attention to the transgressor; unlike disgust, contempt conveys the belief that the transgressor is incompetent (Fischer & Giner-Sorolla, 2016; Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). However, it does not attribute the transgression to an inherent malicious character (Katzir et al., 2019). Like disgust, it has a strong associative character and a connection with intuitive and automatic

sensemaking (Fischer & Giner-Sorolla, 2016). Contempt predisposes evaluators to derogation, disdain and withdrawal from transgressors (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Haidt, 2003; Romani et al., 2013). The dispositional attribution embedded in contempt excludes the possibility of reconciliation through apology or reparations (Greenbaum et al., 2020).

Evaluators may categorise their embodied experience of a given crisis as anger, disgust or contempt. The categorisation will be modulated by changes in core affect, as explained above, and by the evaluators' situational knowledge and their cultural knowledge of emotions. Situational knowledge comprises all the information evaluators have concerning the crisis, including organizational responses to it. Once mobilised, the emotion schemata will in turn affect the evaluators' disposition towards the organization. Anger leads evaluators to ask for redress or punishment (Haidt, 2003) but does not necessarily translate into a negative evaluation of the organization's moral legitimacy (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). In contrast, disgust and contempt incline evaluators to distance themselves from the organization or to ostracise it. Because of their focus on the transgressor, disgust and contempt schemata help evaluators to develop a connection between the crisis and the organization, so the mobilisation of these schemata can contribute to its stigmatisation (Clark & Li, 2023; Devers et al., 2009; Hudson, 2008). Organizations involved in crises that mobilise these embodied feelings can become tainted by strongly negative social evaluations (Devers et al., 2009; Fiske, 2010; Kervyn et al., 2012).

Mitigating negative emotions: Matching the attention focus and interpretation focus

According to the current literature, crisis responses can mitigate negative moral emotions through a process of *matching* (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Raithel & Hock, 2021). Current accounts, however, focus on the idea that organizational responses should match evaluators' situational attributions of the crisis. We go beyond this focus on attributions of situational responsibility, and argue that organizations should match both the attention focus (i.e.

transgression *versus* transgressor) and the interpretation focus of each emotion schema (the transgressor's moral character, in the case of disgust; the organization's general competence, in the case of contempt). Our argument coheres with the dominant models of judgement revision in suggesting that a response type will primarily mitigate the emotion schema that aligns most closely with its content (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002). Matching the attention focus and the interpretation focus will influence the process of emotion construction, mitigating the related emotion schemata.

A message can mitigate anger by improving perceptions of the crisis (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). Organizational response strategies can, for example, persuade evaluators that the crisis is not as severe as originally thought, mitigating the emotion by shifting a dominant component of the schema of anger: the judgement that serious harm is being perpetrated. However, simply improving perceptions of the crisis will not mitigate disgust or contempt. Since they convey a negative perception of the transgressor as a whole, crisis responses need to shift evaluators' perceptions of the transgressor (rather than the transgression).

Consider a crisis that activates disgust, which is associated with a negative perception of organizational morality. The response can match this experience in terms of the attention and interpretation foci by, for example, claiming that the organization is innocent and shifting the blame to another actor. In cases where wrongdoing by a specific individual within the company (e.g. a senior executive) might initially trigger disgust, negative effects will spill over to the organization unless adequate response strategies are deployed to contain the emotion. By convincing evaluators that a different actor is responsible, the company will match the evaluators' focus on the transgressor, challenging their perception of the company as morally corrupt. We therefore propose that there is a fundamental difference between the mitigation of anger and the mitigation of disgust and contempt. While an organization can make concessions when confronted with anger, mitigating the emotion by repairing its wrongdoing, the

stigmatising nature of disgust and contempt implies that any successful mitigation requires a shift, a subversion of the emerging evaluation of the organization.

Figure 2 summarises the proposed model of how crisis responses can mitigate anger, disgust and contempt. The model rests on five propositions which explain the process of mitigation for each of the emotions we consider. We propose that organizational responses mitigate anger when they persuasively update situational knowledge by providing a less negative impression of the transgression (P1). This can be achieved through (a combination of) actions that shift evaluators' knowledge of the crisis, persuading them that 1) the harm is less serious than originally thought, 2) the harm is being repaired, or 3) the supposed transgressor is ultimately not responsible for it. We suggest that organizational responses mitigate disgust when they persuasively update situational knowledge by providing a more positive impression of the transgressor's moral character (P2). This can be achieved by (a combination of) actions that shift evaluators' knowledge and persuade them that the transgressor's character 1) is not adequately reflected in the transgression, or 2) has changed since the transgression. Finally, organizational responses mitigate contempt when they persuasively update situational knowledge by providing a more positive impression of the transgressor's competence (P3). This can be achieved by (a combination of) actions that shift evaluators' knowledge of the transgression and persuade them that the transgressor's competence 1) is not adequately reflected in the transgression, or 2) has improved since the transgression.

A shift in relevant situational knowledge disrupts the process of emotion construction, resulting in a new categorization of the embodied experience (Barrett et al., 2007; Lindquist, 2013). Consider a situation where evaluators experience strong feelings of moral disgust after a crisis. To improve perceptions of the transgressor's character, the organizational response disrupts the process of emotion construction by suggesting that negative bodily sensations need to be reconciled with evaluators' situational knowledge that the company is not morally corrupt;

we propose that the updated situational knowledge leads to a reinterpretation of the bodily feelings associated with a negative emotion. This process reduces the likelihood that the related emotion schemata will be activated, and the emotion categorised according to its primary category (P4), since the situation does not fit the primary category and the related schemata in relevant cultural knowledge of emotions. Finally, a shift in emotion schemata leads to an improvement in the stable evaluation of the organization's moral legitimacy (P5). If negative emotions are mitigated, the damaging effects of the crisis remain restricted to the event, and they do not permeate the longer-term evaluation of the organization (Hudson, 2008).

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Types of organizational response strategies: Complementarity in emotion mitigation

We now turn our attention to the specific content and structure of organizational response strategies and consider the different types of response that organizations can deploy. Since different emotion schemata activate radically different interpretations of a crisis, the mitigation of discrete emotions requires a concerted effort to match the underlying cause of each emotional experience.

With this goal in mind, we adopt a common approach in crisis communication research (Coombs, 2007) and conceptualize both primary and complementary organizational strategies according to the extent to which they focus on different emotions (see Table 2); any strategy with a primary focus on the transgression can be paired with complementary strategies that focus on the transgressor, and vice versa.

To mitigate anger, responses should focus on the transgression, notably on the harm resulting from the crisis and on the perceived responsibility of the organization (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015). Depending on the circumstances, this can be achieved in two ways. First, an organization can attempt to minimise perceptions of harm when this is feasible. If this strategy

is persuasive, evaluators' anger should recede, as the harm associated with the crisis will appear to be minimised. Second, an organization can acknowledge the harm and engage in reparations to reduce the perceived negative consequences of the crisis. In practice, companies may adopt an intermediate stance, recognising that the crisis is harmful to at least some extent and engaging in reparations. Harm mitigation strategies have only limited effects on disgust or contempt, as they do not address perceptions of the transgressor. To target disgust and contempt by focusing on the transgressor, complementary strategies are necessary.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Crisis responses also vary in terms of the level of responsibility an organization accepts. Organizations can either accept responsibility for the crisis or reject it, claiming that the crisis has been caused by an unforeseeable accident or that someone else is to blame (Coombs, 2007; Gangloff et al., 2016). Such strategies aim to shift the focus of anger by suggesting that someone or something else, not the organization, is its legitimate target. Responses can also fall somewhere along this spectrum of responsibility (Iqbal et al., 2024): the organization can accept part of the blame – acknowledging failures in oversight, for example – while noting that the specific responsibility for wrongdoing falls on another actor (see examples in Hersel et al., 2023 or Roulet & Pichler, 2020).

Several approaches can be taken to complement harm mitigation and acceptance of responsibility, from changes in personnel (Gillespie et al., 2014) to decisions about new investments or divestments (Seeger et al., 2005; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002), and from new policies or procedures (Bachmann et al., 2015) to endorsements and other positive organizational cues (Spicer & Okhmatovskiy, 2015). Companies can, for example, fire a prominent leader or divest from a business unit as a way to dissociate themselves from a crisis (Gangloff et al., 2016; Hersel et al., 2023). These responses start from a specific account of the

crisis (e.g. 'the crisis is the fault of this executive') to shape perceptions of the organization. In a similar vein, the organization can launch new policies or projects in response to the crisis (Seeger et al., 2005; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002) or seek external endorsements to boost its reputation (Bachmann et al., 2015; Iqbal et al., 2024). These approaches aim to associate the organization with positive cues. A wide range of interventions may be presented as responses to a crisis, but all such responses share the goal of changing perceptions of the organization's character or competence. Consequently, these responses primarily match the attention focus and interpretations of disgust and contempt, as they aim to ensure that no negative interpretation stabilises and causes the organization to be stigmatised (Clark & Li, 2023; Devers et al., 2009; Hudson, 2008).

Among responses that focus on the transgression, only rejecting responsibility can mitigate contempt and disgust; when executed effectively, this strategy counteracts how these schemata tend to suggest a generalised negative assessment of the organization. In particular, to mitigate disgust and contempt respectively, responses that deny responsibility or shift blame elsewhere can best match a disgust or contempt schema insofar as they aim to displace perceptions of moral corruption or incompetence. However, rejection of responsibility is a complex strategy to implement and carries significant organizational risks (Antonetti & Baghi, 2021).

Table 2 shows that a company can primarily focus on repairing its evaluations through strategies aiming to mitigate disgust or contempt. Responses focused on the transgression can have a complementary role, mitigating anger. Table 2 shows how assuaging these three emotions will usually require a complex set of responses to be strategically deployed, ensuring their internal coherence (Hersel et al., 2023). The coherence of a crisis management strategy concerns 'the degree to which crisis management tactics fit together logically and consistently' (Hersel et al., 2023, p. 4) so that they constitute a plausible whole that matches evaluators' accounts and emotions. For example, accepting responsibility typically requires the

organization to engage in reparatory action; accepting wrongdoing but doing nothing (or too little) to address it would be internally inconsistent (Hersel et al., 2023), and might be perceived as uncaring or even callous (Crossley, 2009; Molho et al., 2017). Similarly, denial that any harm has been caused would be inconsistent with large-scale changes (e.g. firing the CEO) in an attempt to dissociate the organization from the crisis (Hersel et al., 2023). To ensure coherence, organizations must consider different combinations of responses as an integrated whole, since evaluators appraise them as one.

Failing at initial mitigation: Emotion escalation and transmutation

Mitigation of negative emotions fails when responses are mismatched. Figure 3 shows how mismatched responses make the crisis worse through emotion escalation and transmutation. The experience of a mismatched organizational response strategy, one that fails to focus on evaluators' most pressing concerns, represents an update to situational knowledge. Evaluators will interpret mismatched responses as a sign of questionable character, incompetence or both (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Raithel & Hock, 2021). There is a general social expectation that organizations should respond promptly and effectively to crises that involve them directly (Coombs, 2007), so evaluators will interpret mismatched organizational responses as evidence of the organization's intentional disregard for their concerns and expectations. The mismatch will therefore foster negative impressions of the organization's character or competence (P6).

A negative shift in situational knowledge which focuses on the organization's character or competence makes it more likely that bodily feelings will be reinterpreted as disgust, contempt or a combination of the two. In other words, failure to respond adequately to a crisis focuses attention on the transgressor and activates emotion schemata accordingly (P7). Evaluators who initially interpreted the crisis with a disgust or contempt schema will experience an escalation and intensification of these emotions. Their updated situational knowledge confirms the

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evaluators' initial interpretation that the organization does not care and reinforces their interpretation that it has a despicable moral character or is too incompetent to address the crisis. As negative emotions intensify, the crisis will worsen, since evaluators will voice their desire to shun the organization (Herhausen et al., 2019).

In contrast, evaluators who initially experienced anger may undergo a transmutation, so that their anger shifts into disgust or contempt. The experience of anger and the organization's inability to address it will also shift situational knowledge toward a negative perception of the transgressor. A response that fails to match the attention and interpretation foci will probably be interpreted as a situated knowledge cue about the organization's inability or unwillingness to remedy the harm the crisis has caused (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Raithel & Hock, 2021). This new cue will make evaluators shift their attention from the transgression to the transgressor, reappraising their bodily feelings and categorizing them as contempt or disgust; they will now take the organization to be evil or incompetent. This mechanism thus transmutes anger into disgust, contempt or both (P8), as past studies have shown. For instance, in the Market Basket crisis (Lingo & Elmes, 2019) audiences protested against the decision to remove a CEO with family ties to the organization. Angry reactions transmuted into disgust when protesters deemed the board's responses inadequate. This transmutation is reflected in how evaluators attributed the transgression to the new board's malicious character; in their displays of derision and scorn for the 'greedy corporate bastards' (p. 896); and in the shift in the evaluators' responses, from calling for reparations to demanding that the company be shut down (p. 906).

These processes of escalation and transmutation take place gradually, as evaluators experience increasingly intense and increasingly negative emotional responses towards both the crisis and the transgressor. As both processes tend to boost disgust and contempt schemata over time, negative social evaluations of the organization's moral legitimacy grow (P9). As the situation worsens, these negative emotions increasingly suggest that the transgressor's moral

character and competence are irredeemably flawed or tainted. Stigmatisation may follow (Hudson, 2008; Pollock et al., 2019).

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

An illustrative case: The BP *Horizon* oil spill

The *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill is one of the largest environmental disasters in history (BBC, 2010; Ramseur & Hagerty, 2014) and offers a wealth of accessible documentation that illustrates evaluators' responses and the strategies BP employed to influence them. A preliminary analysis revealed that people experienced anger, disgust and contempt after the crisis and BP's response to it. To illustrate our theoretical arguments, we have drawn on various sources: investigative reports and newspaper articles (identified via Factiva), BP's press releases regarding their crisis communication strategy, and other relevant sources such as online forums and social groups focused on boycotting BP (e.g. a Facebook group called 'Boycott BP'). Particularly useful examples of the public's reactions to BP were posted on an online forum[1] managed by the non-profit organization Public Citizen (www.citizen.org). Unless otherwise specified, all the material quoted below is drawn from this forum, which contains 22,014 individual responses (most of them not anonymous but personally signed by the citizens who posted). Meanwhile, the organizational responses provided by BP have been scrutinised in several academic articles (Choi, 2012; Harlow & Harlow, 2013; Kanso et al., 2020).

On 20 April 2010, the *Deepwater Horizon* oil rig exploded and sank in the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 workers. Over a span of 87 days, 4 million barrels' worth of oil leaked from the damaged well before it was successfully capped on 15 July 2010 (EPA, 2024). Both during and after the crisis, evaluators' responses evidenced the three emotion schemata discussed above.

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[1] Public Citizen's forum is accessible as an archived page
(https://web.archive.org/web/20100704120054/http://www.citizen.org/Page.aspx?pid=3311).

Table 3 provides a summary of evaluators' expressions of moral emotions, the mismatched strategies that ensued and evidence of moral emotions especially directed at organizational responses. We provide both evidence of emotion categories and emotion schemata consistent with our theorizing (Figure 2). Columns 1, 3 and 4 are based on quotes from Public Citizen while column 2 contains evidence of mismatched responses as reported in the media. As shown in Table 3, evaluators who expressed anger appeared more focused on the transgression. Their cognitive evaluations centred on the harm that had been caused. they deemed BP responsible for violating norms of care and thereby causing the loss of natural ecosystems. Similarly, their comments show dispositions typically oriented by anger, such as demands for redress or punishment. BP's failure to address the leak as well as their inaccurate communications and the failure to assume responsibility compounded negative collective response leading to even stronger feelings of anger.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Evaluators who expressed disgust were more likely to raise concerns about the moral character of BP. Disgust is demonstrated in comments denouncing BP's carelessness, then directing attention to the company's despicable moral character; the incident is interpreted as a sign of the organization's '*disgusting corporate greed*', '*corruption*' or '*evilness*'. These evaluators make it apparent that BP's immoral character is unchangeable, expressing limited hope in future reparations. The poor leadership displayed by Tony Hayward, BP's CEO at the time, was problematic in this respect because it created the impression that the organization did not care. There was no attempt at repairing the questionable character inferences associated with feelings of disgust thus leading to further escalation of negative responses as shown in Table 3.

Finally, evaluators evidencing contempt also direct their attention to BP but attribute the crisis to its incompetence. Evaluators insult BP and its managers, calling them '*stupid*', '*idiots*', '*morons*' or, more bluntly, '*incompetent a**holes*'. Disdain and scorn are common affective orientations mobilised by the contempt schema. Evaluators are also inclined to ostracise the organization: there are calls for '*illegalizing*' it or '*shutting it down*'. The technical inability to address the crisis and the weak engagement with stakeholders' concern were also damaging for BP. Contempt expressions further escalated as BP was unable to resolve the situation and engaged in technically questionable recovery measures (e.g., the use of paper towels to clean up oil).

Published analyses of BP's communication strategy concur that BP primarily focused on the transgression, and that the organization's response strategies were mostly ineffective in mitigating negative responses. For instance, Choi (2012) classified BP's crisis communication strategy into three frames: 'official updates', 'social responsibility' and 'informational'. The official updates were essentially summaries of BP's relief efforts, focusing on the oil spill. The social responsibility frame provided explanations of BP's commitment to the region, monetary support for local government programmes, and similar actions. The informational frame involved highly detailed mechanical explanations of well operations and attempts to stop the oil spill. Similarly, Harlow and Harlow (2014) discuss how BP focused on fixing the leak and compensating the victims. Beyond the focus on the transgression that characterised much of its response, BP also suffered negative backlash because awkward or offensive statements by its CEO generated significant criticism and some of its attempts at blame shifting did not appear credible (Kanso et al., 2020).

Ultimately, to shift its social evaluation the company was forced to adopt transgressor-focused responses as well: in late July, it announced that the then CEO Tony Hayward would step down in October (Ramseur & Hagerty, 2014). BP demonstrated long-term commitment to

the affected region, paying more than $23 billion in compensation and reparation efforts. In extensive advertising campaigns, the company stressed how external, independent bodies (e.g. the coast guard, business bodies, local government agencies) endorsed its actions as those of a responsible and competent organization. However, these late responses did not appear to shift disgust and contempt schemata significantly, probably because these emotions had already stabilised. Indeed, national polls have reflected negative national sentiment towards BP and its response to the crisis (ABC News/Washington Post, 2010; Pew, 2010).

The oil spill had lasting negative consequences for BP. Beyond lawsuits, cleaning costs and various penalties, BP also suffered consequences directly related to its mismatched crisis response strategy, such as loss of public reputation, loss of trust and widespread boycotts. For example, McGuire et al. (2022) estimated, on the basis of its stock performance, that the *Deepwater Horizon* accident decreased BP's reputation by approximately 50%, and that this decline persisted through the end of 2017. In addition to the evidence provided here concerning BP, we include further evidence of emotion schemata in relation to other crises in a Web Appendix.

Discussion

This paper extends current debates on crisis management that examine how evaluators respond to crises and what responses organizations can deploy to mitigate the fallout from them (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Coombs, 1995; Raithel & Hock, 2021). We also contribute to research investigating the ethical evaluation of other types of failures or transgressions (Khamitov et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2006). Finally, we contribute to research on emotions, extending conceptualizations of how they influence sensemaking (Maitlis et al., 2013) and providing further insights into their role in ethical decision-making (Warner et al., 2024).

Implications for research on the ethical evaluation of crises

We build on constructivist and social-functionalist theories of emotions to clarify how anger, disgust and contempt uniquely influence how evaluators make sense of crises. While past research on responses to crises has identified the important role of anger (Coombs, 2007; Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009), disgust and contempt have been overlooked, despite evidence that they too occur (Fetscherin, 2019; Romani et al., 2013; Xie & Bagozzi, 2019). Previous research has also proposed a narrowly individualistic interpretation of emotions, presenting them as the energising force that drives individual behaviour (Valor et al., 2022). In this respect, our account provides two prerequisites for any nuanced understanding of how discrete emotions shape responses to moral transgressions. First, we conceptualize the role of emotions as culturally fabricated and socially shared schemata that guide evaluators' interpretations of crises. This avoids an overly individualistic treatment and makes it possible to understand emotions' deep socio-cognitive role in making sense of crises (Maitlis et al., 2013). Second, our account explains the mechanisms by which discrete emotions lead to specific types of crisis interpretation (Keltner & Haidt, 1999).

We also extend the current understanding of how crisis response strategies can successfully mitigate negative emotions. We argue that examinations of crisis responses should consider not just how much they conform to attributions of situational responsibility (Raithel & Hock, 2021), but also their relative matching of each emotion schema's focus of attention (i.e. transgression *versus* transgressor) and its focus of interpretation (i.e. moral character, for disgust; competence, for contempt). Thus, we significantly extend existing theories of matching and of how crisis responses address evaluators' concerns. First, we offer a lens for understanding crisis responses when situational responsibilities are not central aspects of evaluators' interpretations. Second, we propose matching as a fundamental mechanism for mitigating anger, disgust and contempt – one that can be tested in future empirical research. Third, we extend the conceptualization of matching by disentangling the roles of the focus of attention and the focus

of interpretation, and by explaining how each operates to mitigate emotions. Our account clarifies why transgression-focused responses are unable to repair the damaging effects of crises that call an organization's moral character into question.

Implications for research on the ethical evaluation of other negative events

The literature on crisis communications has also influenced various research streams examining how companies recover from negative events that are not serious or disruptive enough to qualify as full-blown crises but may still raise important ethical considerations and trigger negative moral emotions. These domains include research on service or product failures (Khamitov et al., 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019) or on cases involving moral transgressions and Corporate Social Irresponsibility (Valor et al., 2022). Our model transcends the popular dichotomy of accommodative–defensive responses (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019) and offers a complementary classification, based on the focus of the emotion schemata that organizational responses should match. The need to consider different forms of matching between schemata and responses appears promising for research in these domains as well.

The study also illustrates the importance of developing theories that, rather than considering emotions in general, focus on the specific discrete emotions that result from a negative event or a violation of normative expectations (e.g. Bachmann et al., 2015; Bagdasarov et al., 2019). The literature on organizational failure and relationship repair might benefit from investigating specific discrete emotions and strategies to mitigate them; managerial recommendations based on a generalised notion of negative emotions might be ineffective and detrimental to organizations (by wasting limited resources on inappropriate responses, for example). Current research on organizational trust repair suggests that after a trust violation, an organization should use repair actions such as explanations, apologies, punishments, penance or

compensation to address the negative emotions its transgression has caused (see Bachmann et al., 2015, p. 1126). We argue that in cases of disgust and contempt, these actions might not suffice for effective trust repair.

Our account also contributes to the growing literature on (de)stigmatisation in management research (e.g. Devers et al., 2009; Hudson, 2008; Pollock et al., 2019). Scholars agree that emotions are very important in (de)stigmatisation processes (Clark & Li, 2023; Pollock et al., 2019), and the psychological evidence indicates that disgust and contempt are key emotions elicited by stigmatised social entities (Fiske, 2010; Kervyn et al., 2012). We contribute to these debates by conceptualizing in more detail both how disgust and contempt are involved in the emergence of stigma and what responses organizations can deploy at crisis onset to counteract them. The literature has exposed how negative evaluations sometimes remain confined to a specific event without long-lasting stigmatising effects (Hudson, 2008). This paper offers a lens to explain how matching crisis responses to the focus of attention and the focus of interpretation may successfully hinder the development of organizational stigma.

Implications for research in ethical decision making

Our conceptual model contributes to the scholarship on ethical decision making that aims to bridge the divide between rational and intuitionist approaches (MacDougall et al., 2014; Warner et al., 2024). While this scholarship acknowledges that emotions influence actions, moral awareness and moral judgements, it has not clearly articulated how they shape ethical decision-making, or how reasoning and emotion interact when people make ethical decisions (Dedeke, 2015; Schwartz, 2016). Constructivist theories of emotions indicate how this influence occurs: acts of injustice do not simply lead to anger, but instead changes in core affect are interpreted as anger when situational knowledge provides cues that a norm of justice has been violated. Theorising emotions' influence on awareness, judgement and action requires

moving beyond a view of emotions as natural kinds and instead conceptualizing emotions as schemata.

Our model also has implications for the treatment of moral emotions in ethical decision making. Previous work, both theoretical and empirical, has treated anger, disgust and contempt as similar emotions where their influence on moral judgments is concerned (Xie et al., 2015; Zollo, 2021). Our conceptual model shows that these emotions convey different attention and interpretation foci and incline individuals to different actions. The notion of emotion schemata indicates how discrete emotions may differently influence ethical decision-making processes.

Implications for research on emotions' role in sensemaking

The role emotions play in sensemaking remains largely undertheorised (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), despite acknowledgement in the literature that sensemaking is an embodied experience (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) that is influenced by emotion schemata (Cristofaro, 2022). Past accounts have emphasised how two components of emotions, valence and arousal, influence both the probability that someone will engage in sensemaking and how that sensemaking progresses over time (Maitlis et al., 2013).

Extending these accounts, we show how discrete moral emotions act as emotion schemata that guide the sensemaking processes of creation, interpretation and enactment (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Our discussion of anger, disgust and contempt shows that these emotions guide creation, directing one's attention to specific cues in the environment and encouraging one to bracket them out: anger directs attention to the transgression, disgust and contempt to the transgressor. They guide interpretation by implying different accounts of the crisis: anger focuses on harm, disgust on moral character and contempt on competence. Finally, they guide enactment by preparing individuals for specific situated actions: anger motivates one to seek

reparation or punishment, whereas disgust and contempt motivate one to ostracise the transgressor.

This constructivist view of emotions provides a suitable foundation for understanding the role of discrete emotions in moral sensemaking; it complements and extends past approaches to ethical decision-making based on intuitions (Islam, 2020; McManus, 2021). This conceptualization of emotions may explain the recursive dynamics between sensemaking and emotional experiences which past studies have reported (Liu & Maitlis, 2014); it shows that the separation of cognition and emotion is arbitrary, since both are fused together in evaluators' embodied experience. We note that the centrality of updates in situational knowledge, which in our model explains how organizational strategies can mitigate emotion, will need to be reconsidered in most organizational sensemaking processes. In organizational settings which involve interpersonal interactions over time, core affect and situational knowledge are bound to interact and jointly shift (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015).

Managerial implications

The paper emphasises the limitations of responses that focus excessively on situational attributions of blame. When a company is responsible for wrongdoing, managers should certainly accept that responsibility and take steps to repair the negative consequences. Crisis responses, however, should also address any concerns about the organization's moral character and competence that emerge from prototypical experiences of disgust and contempt. The crisis responses outlined in this paper show how companies can deal with concerns about blame – which is important for reducing anger – while also addressing the broader normative concerns linked with disgust and contempt. Our model can inform managerial decision-making by revealing the specific roles which different crisis responses play in reducing evaluators' negative emotions.

This paper also highlights why it is unreasonable to expect that accommodative responses will suffice to restore evaluators' perception of the organization. We show that when crises stir strong negative emotions, it will be necessary to engage in broader responses that target the different discrete emotions evaluators experience. Companies should intentionally plan for broader and more complex responses, focusing on perceptions of the organization as a whole, since such responses allow for matching with experiences of disgust and contempt.

Finally, we recommend monitoring evaluators' responses to determine which emotions are most likely to characterise the aftermath of a crisis. To design more effective responses, organizations can monitor discrete emotions as a preliminary step. A range of tools can monitor emotions on social networks (Back et al., 2010) and inform the choice of crisis response strategy.

Limitations and future research directions

This paper has focused on how crises initially unfold (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015). Given our focus on the relationships between evaluators' interpretations and crisis responses, we have ignored the subsequent dynamic. This is an important limitation that offers opportunities for further research. We still know relatively little about how emotions evolve over time during a crisis, as most existing research focuses on cross-sectional analyses at a given point in time (Khamitov et al., 2020; Valor et al., 2022). Research on crisis responses has primarily focused on immediate effects and neglected questions about how the responses influence evaluations over time (Bundy et al., 2017). Future research in both of these directions would be extremely valuable for further developing our understanding of how crisis responses can mitigate different negative emotions over time.

Our account also does not discuss how differences in evaluators' characteristics, and in organizational profiles, can influence interpretations of crises and the effectiveness of different

crisis responses. As experiences of discrete emotions vary across individuals (Cameron et al., 2015), different evaluators might show an inclination towards different emotion schemata. Previous perceptions of the organization also play an important role in explaining the effectiveness of different crisis responses (Coombs, 2007).

One additional element we did not explicitly discuss is the relative intensity of different emotional experiences. Crises often involve intense emotional experiences (Valor et al., 2022), and the precise intensity of the emotions can have an impact on the model. These themes offer important avenues for future research on the role of emotions in crisis management.

Finally, our account has focused on three emotions, but other affective experiences play important roles in evaluators' interpretations of crises. Evaluators can, for example, experience guilt about their own potential responsibility for the crisis or association with a perpetrator. Similarly, evaluators can feel compassion for the suffering victims of a crisis. Further research is needed to consider the effects of these experiences and the organizational responses that are most suitable for addressing these emotions.

Concluding remarks

Crisis responses play a critical role in repairing an organization's relationship with its stakeholders. Despite this, and the likelihood that crises will spark intense emotions, little is known about how responses can mitigate negative moral emotions. This article offers an account of how the discrete emotions of anger, disgust and contempt influence evaluators' interpretations of crises; it also examines the responses that are needed to mitigate each of these emotions. We significantly extend the notion of matching – which is dominant in extant crisis management research (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Raithel & Hock, 2021) – to include new dimensions that are central to appeasing anger, disgust and contempt. In doing so, we propose an approach that can be extended to consider other discrete emotions, further increasing our

understanding of how evaluators' embodied experiences shape their interpretations of organizations and influence the effectiveness of organizational responses.

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Table 1: Comparing the natural-kind and constructivist views of moral emotions

	Antecedents of emotions	Phenomenological experience of emotions	Consequences of emotions
Natural-kind view	Different discrete emotions (e.g. anger, disgust, contempt) have specific antecedents that determine the emergence of bodily sensations and the activation of related cognitions.	The experience of different discrete emotions (e.g. anger, disgust, contempt) is unique and universally shared because it is linked to the evolutionary functions of the emotion.	To serve their evolutionary functions, different discrete emotions (e.g. anger, disgust, contempt) are primarily concerned with the preparation and activation of specific behavioural responses.
Constructivist view	Different discrete emotions (e.g. anger, disgust, contempt) are a conceptual act, in which knowledge of emotions and situational information about the elicitors are used to interpret bodily sensations.	The experience of different discrete emotions (e.g. anger, disgust, contempt) varies significantly across contexts, even though each discrete emotion has some general traits that respond to its evolutionary functions.	To serve their evolutionary functions, different discrete emotions (e.g. anger, disgust, contempt) activate a specific set of meanings, beliefs and judgments, in addition to the preparation and activation of different behavioural responses.

Table 2: Crisis responses for different target emotions

Crisis response attention focus	Primary response strategy	Examples of relevant responses	Emotion primarily targeted	Complementary response strategy	Complementary emotion(s) targeted
Focused on the transgression	Mitigate perceptions of harm	- Compensation/commitment of resources to repair harm - Minimise/downplay perceptions of harm	Anger	Dissociate the organization from the crisis Associate the organization with positive cues	Disgust, Contempt
	Accept responsibility	- Apology - Acceptance of punishment - Detailed explanation of the events	Anger	Dissociate the organization from the crisis Associate the organization with positive cues	Disgust, Contempt
	Reject responsibility	- Denial - Shifting blame towards external actors or circumstances	Anger, Disgust, Contempt	Dissociate the organization from the crisis Associate the organization with positive cues	Disgust, Contempt
Focused on the transgressor	Dissociate the organization from the crisis	- Firing a leader or specific group of employees… - Divesting from a brand or SBU… - Separating from a supplier or other network partner… …who caused the crisis	Disgust, Contempt	Mitigate perceptions of harm AND/OR Reject responsibility	Anger
	Associate the organization with positive cues	- Receiving an endorsement from someone… - Obtaining a certification or an award… - Hiring someone or investing in a programme… …known for their/its status	Disgust, Contempt	Mitigate perceptions of harm Accept responsibility OR Reject responsibility	Anger

Table 3: Moral emotions and organizational responses in the BP *Horizon* oil spill[*]

| 1. Evaluators' moral emotions	2. Evidence of mismatched response strategies	3. Evaluators' updated situational knowledge	4. Evaluators' updated moral emotions (escalation and transmutation)
Anger ▪ *I'm* **angry** *at them for poisoning our environment!* ▪ *I am* **very angry** *about the horrible loss of wildlife […]* ▪ *700 birds, 250 turtles, and who knows what else, all dead because of oil and politics.* **F*ck you, BP**.	▪ Inability to address the problem: BP acknowledged that the containment vessel was unlikely to capture all the oil due to its small size (The New York Times, 2010a). ▪ Inaccurate communications: The company reported the spill rate as 5,000 barrels per day, while independent scientists estimated it at 100,000 (Mother Jones, 2010a). ▪ Failure to take responsibility: CEO Tony Hayward described the event as a "natural disaster" and said the risk was "one in a million." (The New York Times, 2010b)	▪ Stakeholders increasingly recognized that the crisis remained unresolved: "It's ridiculous that we are still even talking about this in July!! With the billions and billions of dollars BP Plc has, and with all the brilliant engineers working for BP […] the tank pipe is still pumping out 60,000 gallons of crude oil DAILY!! What are these people doing!" ▪ Another urged, "BP should be working faster to solve this problem. The disaster is awful, and the people in charge need to get moving to get the situation under control!" ▪ Although some still expressed hope—"I hope they're able to clean this mess up"—many doubted BP's capacity to resolve the crisis. Another observer warned bluntly, "No resolution in sight […]." Growing awareness of the disaster's persistence fueled mounting concern about the lack of resolution.	▪ Stakeholder reactions to BP's handling of the Deepwater Horizon disaster increasingly reflected intense anger (escalation): "Our family is **OUTRAGED**! BP, *instead of focusing on fixing the problem*, has been more focused on censorship of proper coverage of a major environmental disaster." ▪ Another demanded greater accountability: "*BP needs to clean up the big mess it made.* And stop trying to pass it on to the people to clean it up. You're killing a lot of animals, and people are getting sick and will end up with cancer if they are not careful. **CLEAN UP YOUR BIG MESS, BP!!!!!!!**" ▪ Anger progressively changed into disgust or contempt, conveying unfiltered hostility, as in the statements "**Fuck BP**," "**F them !!!!!**," and "**BURN IN HELL BP**." Others called for retribution: "*THEY SHOULD BE IMPRISONED AT A FEMA CAMP WITH NO FOOD AND WATER PERIOD!!!!!*"

Disgust			
Disgust ▪ *They **disgust** me by the lack of concern for the world and the people that live in it!* ▪ BP thoroughly **disgusts and infuriates me!** ▪ *They should be jailed for crimes against humanity and raping the earth's wildlife and natural resources* ▪ *They **disgust** me and I worry they will never be able to make up for what they've done to the gulf.*	▪ <u>Worsening of character inferences:</u> BP's leadership failed to repair the negative character inferences triggered by the crisis. Tony Hayward's comments, such as "What the hell did we do to deserve this?" (The New York Times, 2010c) and "I would like my life back," (The New York Times, 2010d) personalized the crisis and reinforced his connection to it, rather than distancing the organization from the perceived source of moral failure. ▪ <u>Lack of positive signals:</u> BP did not associate itself with positive cues or credible third parties that could have improved its moral standing. Claims like "We have made extraordinary strides in three years" (The New York Times, 2010e) and describing the event as a "natural disaster" (The New York Times, 2010f) did not introduce any new, trustworthy actors or signals of ethical reform. These responses implicitly kept evaluators' focus on the company's own perceived insensitivity and failure.	▪ Stakeholder situational knowledge increasingly focused on BP's perceived moral character. Descriptions emphasized irresponsibility, dishonesty, and greed. One observer characterized BP as "irresponsible, psychopathic and criminally negligent." ▪ Stakeholders frequently questioned BP's truthfulness. One comment stated, "BP has never told the truth since April 20," while another asserted, "The company is ripe with greed and corruption." ▪ Statements consistently depicted BP as lacking remorse and ethical responsibility. One person remarked, "After seeing BP's reaction to this horrific event in the Gulf, listening to all the lies, seeing absolutely NO remorse whatsoever for all these unnecessary deaths, both human and animal — I will NEVER EVER use anything that is associated with BP." Another summed up the perception more bluntly: "They're a bunch of lying, dirty bastards who care about nothing but $." One person concluded, "They are evil, rotten, no-good, murdering thugs."	▪ Evaluators intensified their expressed revulsion toward BP's actions and character, linking their rejection directly to perceived disregard for environmental and human welfare. One person stated, "This disaster is not properly being accounted for while killing off so much life on our planet. **DISGUSTING!!!!**" Another echoed the sentiment: "The more I watch, **the more disgusted I am**." One concluded: "**BP YOU MAKE ME SICK!**" ▪ Expressions of disgust were closely tied to personal distancing from the company. One evaluator wrote, "I will never again buy gas from these *heartless bastards*!" while another declared, "I'm not going to spend another red penny to those *bastards*!" Calls for broader rejection were also evident: "*Boycott BP*. **They suck**. *Run them out of the states*. They have destroyed so much." ▪ Such distancing intentions also intensified and became more visceral. One person wrote, "*I would like to see all the BP executives treading oil*—then, when volunteers try to save them, they're prevented from being saved by BP's own—and end up being burned alive—just like all the endangered sea turtles. *I cry daily over this... **I'm so disgusted**.*"

| Contempt			
▪ They have **idiots** running the business. ▪ *These* **morons** *need to be hit where it hurts the most.* Their bank account. *They should be slapped for having no emergency plan.* ▪ *It's unbelievable how incompetent one company can be.* ▪ I think that BP is **extremely stupid** and *should be closed down forever!!!*	▪ <u>Technical incompetence in the recovery:</u> The use of ineffective technical fixes worsened perceptions associated with contempt: *"BP tries a 100-ton containment dome. It fails. So does 'junk shot."* (Mother Jones, 2010b) Hayward publicly claimed that *"top kill is going pretty well according to plan,"* (Mother Jones, 2010c) only for it to fail a day later, followed by his subdued comment: *"I am disappointed that this operation did not work."* (The New York Times, 2010g) ▪ *Weak engagement with the recovery:* When the EPA demanded BP switch to less-toxic dispersants, the company refused, further resisting meaningful reform. Hayward's vague acknowledgment that *"the investigation… will undoubtedly show up things that we should be doing differently"* (The New York Times, 2010h) lacked any decisive action. Symbolic gestures, like BP using **paper towels** to clean up oil, were seen as unserious (Mother Jones, 2010d).	▪ Operational failures worsened evaluators' evaluation of the organization's ability: "The company had no good emergency plan for an oil spill and appears to have cut corners in terms of safety." ▪ Doubts about BP's technical expertise also became more explicit. As one person asked, "Doesn't someone in the world know how to stop this thing, especially an 'expert' from BP?!!!" One person concluded: "I think that BP is extremely stupid and should be closed down forever!!!" Such statements reflected a broad perception that BP lacked not only the tools and the knowledge, but even the basic competence expected of a company managing such a crisis. Another evaluator described BP's superficial response: "It's time to take BP down and make them clean their mess, and I mean REALLY clean their mess, no more of this kid toy shovel and bucket playing with the sand."	▪ As more details about BP's handling of the Deepwater Horizon disaster emerged, expressions of contempt became more explicit and intense. Evaluators expressed disappointment at BP's apparent lack of technical ability and inadequate preparation. One person, reacting to the company's failure, referred to "**horrific negligence**," signaling deep frustration at BP's inability to properly manage the unfolding crisis. ▪ Doubts about BP's expertise also contributed to moral disillusionment. One evaluator questioned, "The way that BP is handling this spill and are treating the American people in the Southern region **is a disgrace!** […] The Brits had an opportunity to be honest with the American people and explain what they are doing to clean up this mess, but *instead they chose to be reactive, ignorant and throw a little bit of money around to make this go away*."

Emotion schemata are reported in *italics;* the emotion category is reported **in bold**.

Unless otherwise stated, all data used in this table is sourced from www.publiccitizen.org.
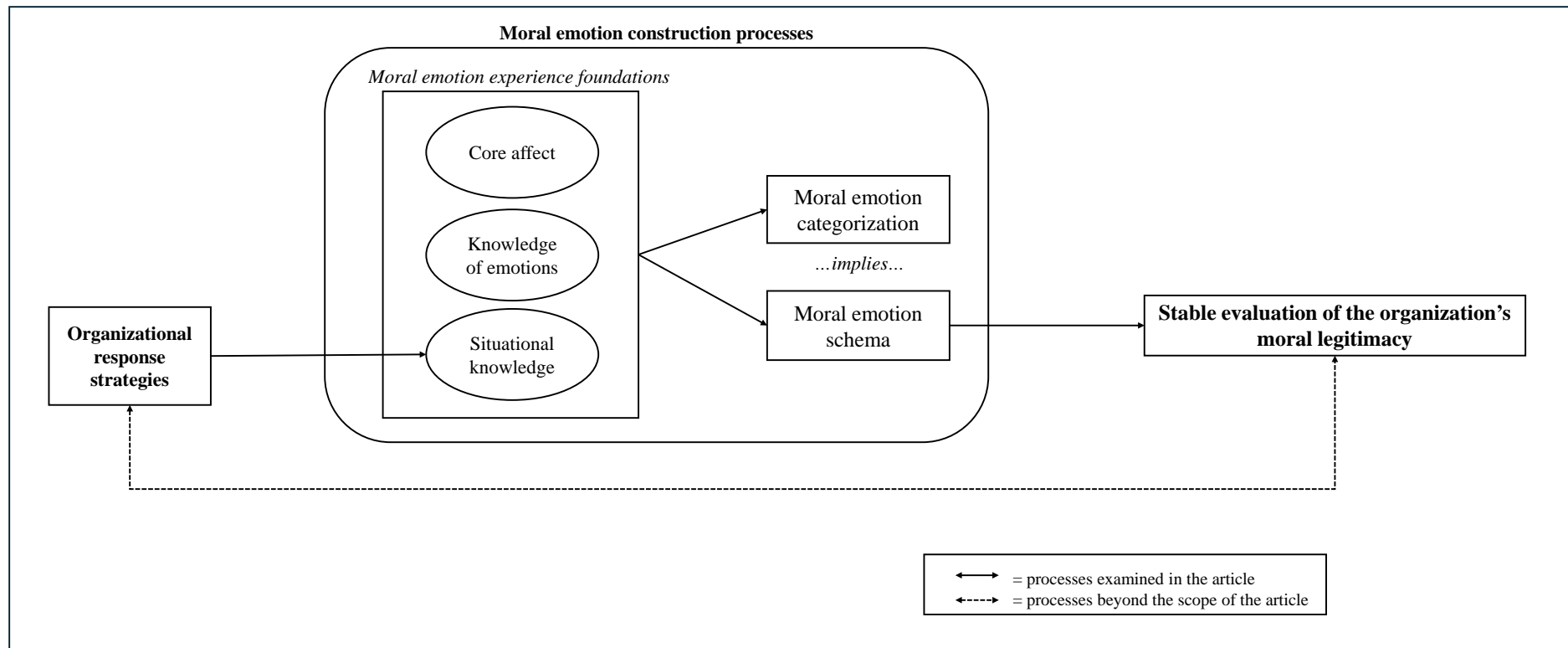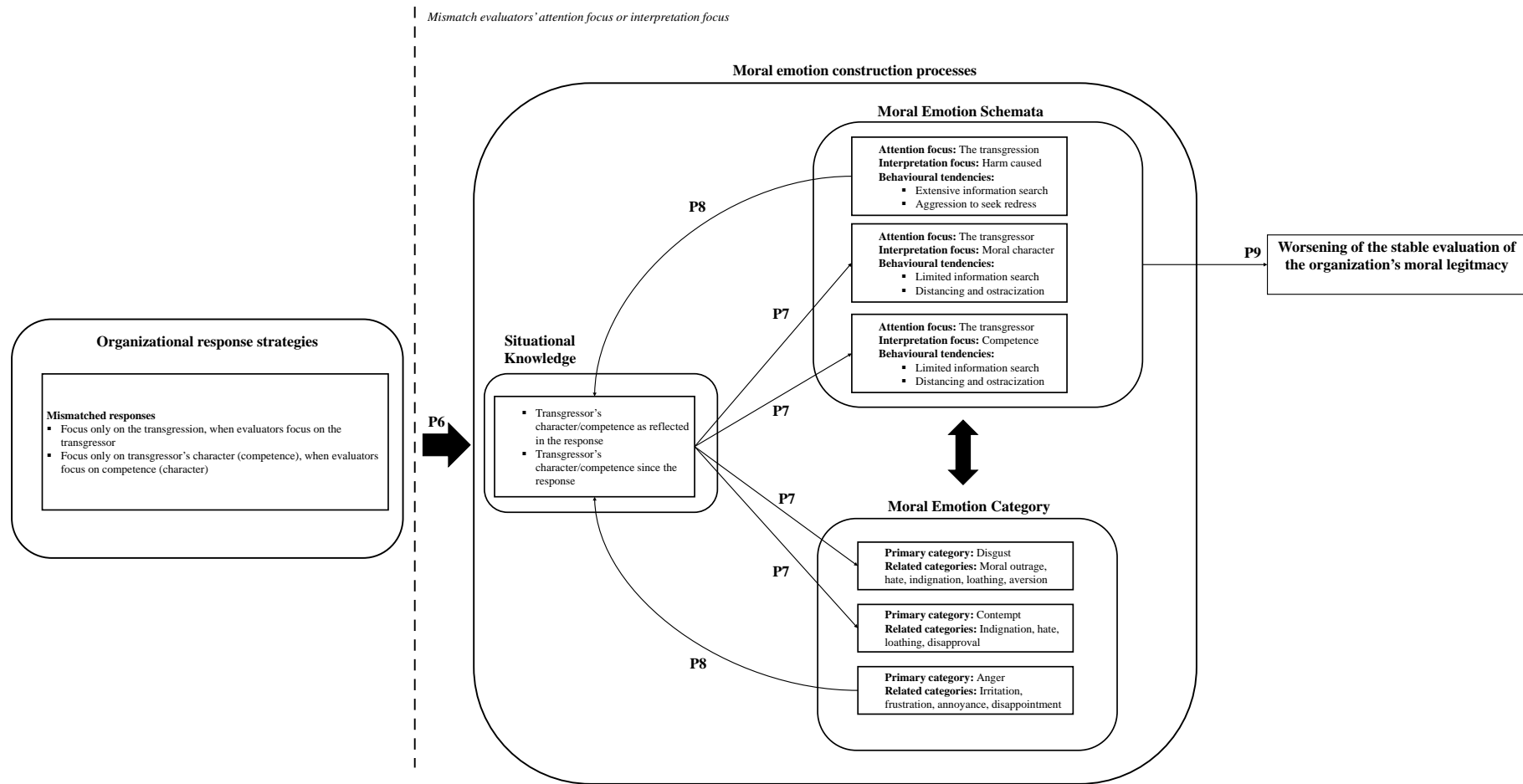
Figure 1: Moral emotions, organizational strategies and evaluators' responses
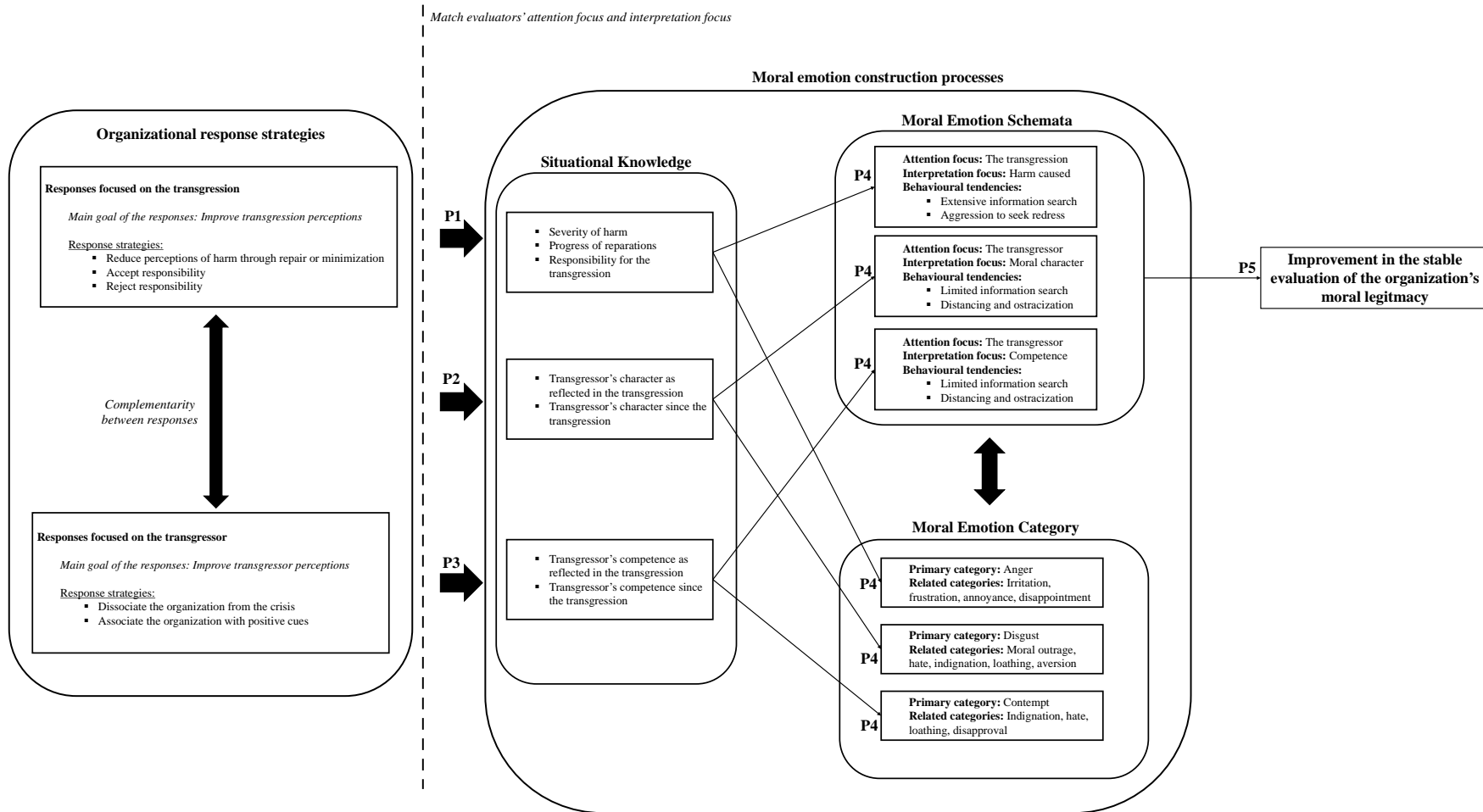
Figure 2: Mitigating moral emotions by matching attention and interpretation foci

Figure 3: Negative moral emotions' escalation and transmutation following mismatched organizational response strategies

WEB APPENDIX

Table A1. Examples of anger, disgust and contempt in the sensemaking of recent crises.

Case study	Emotional responses to the crisis	Exemplary data
Tesco & the food adulteration scandal Crisis in brief: The 2013 horse meat scandal was a food industry scandal in parts of Europe in which foods advertised as containing 100% beef were found to contain undeclared or improperly labelled horse meat – as much as 100% of the meat content in some cases	Anger focus on transgression (AF) interpretation: harm (AI1) and responsibility (AI2)	Tweet3: Wtf how the hell is Tesco (AI2) selling beef with traces of horse (AI1) in it. (Tse et al., 2016) Horsemeat scandal: Supermarkets 'share anger and outrage […]'. In a public letter, 11 firms, including Tesco and Asda, said they shared shoppers' 'anger and outrage'. Earlier, Downing Street said big retailers selling affected products had a responsibility (AI2) to answer key questions on the scandal (AF). (BBC, 2013)
	Contempt focus on transgressor (CF) interpretation: incompetence (CI)	Tweet1: Oh dear Tesco (CF), I have huge concerns about inability to monitor their supply chain (CI). (Tse et al., 2016)
	Disgust focus on transgressor (DF) interpretation: immoral character (DI)	The answer is simple. Don't buy from corporate crooks (DF). #trustlocal people who care about more than profits. #itsnothard https://twitter.com/richardesignsUK/status/291342036433522689 @MetroUK If you buy on price this is what you get. These burgers look disgusting (DI). Pay a little more at a decent butcher (DI) & know what you eat. (Twitter, 2013)

UK airports & COVID-19 related delays Crisis in brief: Booming demand for summer travel after two years of COVID-19 travel restrictions swamped airlines and airports in Europe, which have been left shorthanded after laying off many pilots, cabin crew, check-in staff, ground crew and baggage handlers.	Anger focus on transgression (AF) interpretation: harm (AI1) and responsibility (AI2)	There are more reports of delays (AI1) at <u>Birmingham Airport</u> - with some passengers already fuming […]. Coventry Telegraph (2022) Twitter user @GowtagePete posted a message within the last hour to vent his anger, saying: 'Arghh! Stuck in Birmingham airport! It's chaos!!! And <u>@TUIUK</u> are no use at all having told us too late our flight is delayed (AI1) 12hrs due to Air Traffic Control strike in Italy! (AI2)'. Coventry Telegraph (2022) Angry passengers have again faced long queues at Manchester Airport (AI1), with some describing the conditions there as a 'shambles' and 'utter chaos'. (BBC, 2022) Manchester Airport queues 'a shambles', say angry passengers […] Hell on earth this morning <u>@manairport</u> - avoid it like the plague!!! Everyone missing flights despite getting there 3 hours before departure (AI1). Absolute and complete chaos. No check in staff. (BBC, 2022) Angry passengers at one of the UK's busiest airports crawled through a luggage conveyer belt after waiting for their bags for 90 minutes (AI1), footage from Dispatches shows. https://www.businessinsider.co.za/passengers-crawled-though-conveyor-belt-entrance-find-luggage-2022-7 Heathrow, Manchester & Stansted flyers fury as 100 flights cancelled today 'sort it out!' (AI1) (Express, 2022)
	Contempt focus on transgressor (CF) interpretation: incompetence (CC)	Emirates slams Heathrow's (CF) 'incompetence' (CI) and vows to resist 'airmageddon' as London hub tries to cut flights. (Fortune, 2022) Passenger at Manchester Airport @LYOC8 called out the transport hub: '@manairport stellar job #machesterairport You've (CF) had days and days with delays and ridiculous queues to pass security in departures and yet you still won't hire more staff!! (CI) #cheapskate Stellar job! #shameful.' (Express, 2022) Passenger Sue Litchfield added: 'I think this is a ridiculous situation. They (CF) clearly haven't got enough staff! (CI)'. (ITV, 2022)
Wells Fargo & The forging of customer accounts	Anger focus on transgression (AF)	Suddenly Wells Fargo employees, such as Hambek, came forward in droves, and America got mad in a way that we hadn't over other financial scandals (AF). 'I think the public expects international financial banks to lose billions in nefarious ways,' says Isaac Boltansky, the director of policy research at Compass Point, a prominent boutique investment bank. 'But learning that the American checking account has been co-opted (AC1) has insidious wrinkles. This is supposed to be one of the most trusted things in the world'. (Vanity Fair, 2017)

Crisis in brief: The Wells Fargo account fraud scandal is a controversy brought about by the creation of millions of fraudulent savings and checking accounts on behalf of Wells Fargo clients without their consent.	interpretation: harm (AI1) and responsibility (AI2)	Wells Fargo, the US bank under fire for creating fake customer accounts (AI1, AI2), faced angry shareholders at its annual meeting in Florida on Tuesday. (BBC, 2017) Wells Fargo's board of directors was re-elected Tuesday, despite angry and at times shouted opposition from investors who demanded the panel's ouster in response to the bank's scandal over millions of unauthorized accounts (A1I1). US Money Today (2017) Most Americans have assumed their bank accounts are sacrosanct. But with the major scandal unfolding at Wells Fargo, angry former employees illuminate the alarming pressure that allegedly led local bankers to defraud perhaps more than a million customers (AI1). (Vanity Fair, 2017)
	Disgust focus on transgressor (DF) interpretation: immoral character (DI)	Wells Fargo's own analysis found that between 2011 and 2015 its employees had opened more than 1.5 million deposit accounts and more than 565,000 credit-card accounts that may not have been authorized. Some customers were charged fees on accounts they didn't know they had, and some customers had collection agencies calling them due to unpaid fees on accounts they didn't know existed (DI). Gaming was so widespread that it had even spawned related terms, such as 'pinning,' which meant assigning customers personal-identification numbers, or PINs, without their knowledge in order to impersonate them on Wells Fargo computers and enroll them in various products without their knowledge (DI). The fraud was not only big, but blatant, with 193,000 non-employee accounts opened between 2011 and 2015 for which the only e-mail domain name listed was @wellsfargo.com, according to the Los Angeles city attorney's office. (DC) […] At congressional hearings in which John Stumpf's appealing midwestern diffidence suddenly seemed like appalling arrogance, representatives from both sides of the aisle let loose. 'Fraud is fraud. Theft is theft,' (DI) thundered Texas Republican congressman Jeb Hensarling, 'and what happened at Wells Fargo (DF) over the course of many years cannot be described any other way.'(DI) (Vanity Fair, 2017) Wells Fargo (DF) has already faced the scrutiny, ire and disgust of the House and Senate over recent revelations that employees opened 2 million unauthorized accounts in customers' names to meet sales quotas (DC). (Nextcity, 2016) Beyond genuinely disgusted at @WellsFargo (DF). My paraphrased excerpt of @planetmoney below; listen to the full episode! http://npr.org/sections/money [...] Ashley, working for them and making only $35k per year in San Francisco, was continuously harasses to sign people up for accounts they didn't want (DC). An old mad comes in, pensioner, $200 in overdraft fees due to being duped into excess accounts. She dips into her own savings to get him back in the black. She reports the incident to the internal ethics line. Nothing. Tries again. Nothing. She refuses to fraudulently push excess accounts onto people. Fired. Worse, Wells Fargo put her onto a permanent blacklist that others in the industry pay attention to – she can't get a job anywhere else (DC). (Twitter, 2016)

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