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Playing the grim reaper: How employees experience carrying out a downsizing

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ABSTRACT This article reports a qualitative study that explores how employees who are responsible for carrying out a downsizing – 'downsizing agents' – experience and react to their downsizing responsibilities. Our results demonstrate that, when the work of carrying out a downsizing becomes emotionally taxing, downsizing agents react by cognitively, emotionally, and physically distancing themselves from their roles. We explore forces that make carrying out a downsizing more taxing and the conditions under which distancing reactions become more likely.

KEYWORDS challenging work roles ▪ downsizing agents ▪ reactions

Downsizing is a frequent organizational change that has been implemented for more than 20 years. Used extensively by organizations during the difficult economic times of the 1980s and early 1990s (Morris et al., 1999), downsizing involves reductions in personnel and the redesign of work processes to improve organizational efficiency, competitiveness, and productivity (Cameron, 1994; Kozlowski et al., 1993). Although scarcer during the economic boom of the late 1990s, many organizations in the troubled US business environment of the early 21st century have again undertaken downsizing efforts (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004).

Although scholars claim that research-based knowledge about downsizing is still underdeveloped considering the prevalence and persistence of downsizing in organizations (Budros, 1999, 2002), extant research explores

downsizing from a variety of perspectives. By far the most extensive scholarly work concerns downsizing survivors (e.g. Brockner, 1988; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998; Paterson & Cary, 2002; Wiesenfeld et al., 2000). However, researchers have less frequently investigated how those individuals who plan for and carry out downsizing – we call them 'downsizing agents' (hereafter referred to as DAs) – experience and react to their responsibilities.

We define DAs as individuals with responsibilities for planning, carrying out, and/or dealing with the aftermath of a downsizing. This definition is deliberately broad so that it refers to any individuals, no matter their organizational level or daily professional role, who have formal responsibilities for carrying out a particular downsizing. Our definition does not assume that a certain type of person (such as manager or human resources [HR] professional) serves as a DA across all situations; rather it recognizes that different types of people play a DA role depending upon the situation or context.

Research on DAs is important and valuable because their experiences are distinct and have impacts in a variety of ways. For example, unlike Frost's (2003) toxic handlers who voluntarily help employees in emotional pain, some DAs do so only as part of their responsibilities. Furthermore, although DAs are also survivors, their experiences differ from those of other survivors because of their dual role as receivers and agents of change (Dewitt et al., 2003). In addition, DAs indirectly influence the success of a downsizing through their methods for carrying it out (Wright & Barling, 1998) and their influences over employees' reactions (Dewitt et al., 2003). For example, DAs influence employees' equity and justice perceptions because these perceptions arise from the implementation methods of DAs (Brockner, 1992; Wiesenfeld et al., 2000). Finally, the institutionalized nature of downsizing and the often high number of those who are laid off make DAs' experiences distinct from those who lay off others in situations unrelated to downsizing (i.e. performance issues).

Some scholars have theorized about or empirically studied DAs' reactions to their responsibilities (Dewitt et al., 2003; Folger & Skarlicki, 1998; Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997; Wiesenfeld et al., 2000; Wright, 2000; Wright & Barling, 1998). These studies revealed that carrying out lay-offs is often professionally demanding and leads to long-lasting emotions (Wright & Barling, 1998). DAs are likely to find ways to cope with the pressures of their responsibilities. For example, Folger and Skarlicki (1998), who investigated managers' reactions to laying off employees using a scenario study and survey, found that managers' attributions about the need for lay-offs affected managerial distancing behaviors in carrying out the lay-off in the form of truncated dismissal meetings. Distancing behaviors in a downsizing can

generally be thought of as actions that decrease one's attachment to or involvement in one's role and/or responsibilities. DAs who engage in distancing behaviors might be less able to respond to employees' needs in a downsizing.

Staying connected and present for employees as one carries out a downsizing may be one of the major challenges associated with being a DA. Research on jobs and professions that require people to come face-to-face with highly difficult workplace situations laden with negative emotions, such as studies of 'death-tellers' (those responsible for telling others about the death of a loved-one), demonstrates this tension in shaping how people understand and approach their work (Clark & LaBeff, 1982). This research demonstrates that these intense, negative circumstances shape how a person approaches and emotionally engages with the tasks. For example, death-tellers develop complex protocols for carrying out their work that, in part, help buffer them from having to deal with others' negative emotions (Clark & LaBeff, 1982).

Whereas death-tellers are primarily messengers, DAs may – at the extreme of responsibility – be managers whose poor decisions led directly to the need to conduct a downsizing or whose decisions led to specific others being let go. This added burden of responsibility is likely to influence how and when DAs connect with their downsizing work. Clearly, although Folger and Skarlicki's (1998) research provides a start, more knowledge is needed that reveals how DAs engage with their responsibilities as 'grim reapers' in a downsizing.

This article reports the results of a qualitative study that sheds further light on how DAs remain close to and distanced from the downsizing experience. Although the study was inductive, and we did not set out to study DAs' engagement with the downsizing, we found that DAs tended to respond to the burdens of carrying out a downsizing by distancing themselves – from the downsizing events and their responsibilities for carrying it out. Our results also shed light on the circumstances making DAs' experiences more taxing and factors that seemed to exacerbate distancing reactions. To develop a conceptual framework from our data, we drew from a range of theoretical perspectives, including research on emotions at work, role engagement, stress and coping, dirty work, and responsibility and accountability at work. After reporting our findings, we discuss implications for research and practice. In particular, this study makes a contribution to our understanding about the tensions between the need for DAs to maintain their own psychological health by withdrawing from the tough circumstances of their responsibilities, and the organization's need for DAs to remain 'close to' the event so that the downsizing is most effective. In the discussion we explore

these tensions in greater depth. First, however, we discuss methods for this research.

Methods

Our inductive approach built insights grounded in the experience of study participants within a particular context (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and assisted our research into an understudied area (Yin, 1984). Ours was a realist-oriented qualitative approach that followed the guidelines presented in Miles and Huberman (1994) for qualitative data analysis. As such, we sought to capture 'real' experiences of DAs by following a step-by-step data collection and analysis process that surfaced regularities across DAs' experiences and reactions.

Organizational context

All of those interviewed carried out a downsizing at Bridging Services Organization (BSO, a pseudonym), a bridging organization between financial investment firms and their customers. The company provided mutual fund record keeping and shareholder services for client organizations in the financial industry. Most BSO employees worked in the financial district of a large city in the northeast region of the United States.

BSO had grown from 50 to 2800 employees in just under a decade. Its parent company expected 20 percent growth in profits each year. BSO had not reached this goal in the period just before this study; thus, it undertook a downsizing to make its financial goals and to signal to its parent company that BSO was improving its performance. This was the second downsizing in BSO's history. It included cutbacks in employee perks, the elimination of open positions, and job and departmental restructuring.

DAs planned BSO's downsizing over several months. The management team not involved in planning was given two days' notice of BSO's downsizing. There was no prior announcement to the general employee population. Most of the lay-offs were executed in one day; however, some employee terminations failed to occur for days.

A schedule developed by the HR professionals dictated the order and location of lay-offs, as well as who was to meet with whom. Employees to be laid off were summoned to their manager's office, where the manager delivered the message, sometimes using a script provided by HR. Employees were supposed to be told that their job was eliminated as a part of BSO's effort to respond to its financial difficulties. After delivering the news, the

manager left the room and the terminated employee met alone with an HR generalist who explained severance packages, outplacement services, and other logistical issues. DAs carried out terminations in 15–30-minute increments. In total, 50 employees were let go in the downsizing. Although numbers were small, many of those laid off were upper level managers; thus, the downsizing had a significant impact on BSO.

Participants and data collection

These data were collected starting about one month after BSO's downsizing was carried out and comprised in-depth interviews with 40 DAs. BSO's Chief Operating Officer (COO) gave us permission to collect data. The Senior Vice President of Human Resources provided us with a list of all of those who were formally responsible for planning for, carrying out, and/or assisting in the aftermath of the downsizing. This study included all of these DAs with the exception of two individuals who had left the company and one who was unavailable. Participants represented a wide range of organizational levels: CEO (2.5 percent), COO (2.5 percent), senior vice president (12.5 percent), vice president (30 percent), director (15 percent), manager (25 percent), and individual contributor (12.5 percent). Further, participants represented different functional areas: human resources, operations, finance, public relations, legal, security, and information technology. Organizational tenure averaged 4.5 years (range: 1–12.5 years). Thirty percent of participants had either already experienced or carried out another downsizing.

The principal investigator (who is the lead author of this article) or a trained research assistant conducted the interviews in participants' own offices. At the outset of the interviews, we assured participants' confidentiality. We told participants that this study's purpose was to understand their perspectives about the recent downsizing before, during, and after it was carried out. We asked participants the same series of open-ended questions, exploring their experiences before, during, and after the downsizing (e.g. 'Tell me how other people were reacting.' 'How were you reacting?'). The interview protocol, adapted from Isabella (1990), sought to build theory on how DAs experienced and understood BSO's downsizing as it unfolded. The protocol contained a uniform set of questions which allowed us to build comparative data on DAs' perceptions of their experiences and reactions to this particular organizational change. However, when appropriate within each of the interviews, the interviewer also asked clarification and follow-up questions. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

Data analysis

We arranged for tapes to be professionally transcribed verbatim into computer files, resulting in over 1000 pages of transcribed interviews. The principal investigator, with some assistance from doctoral research assistants, analyzed the data. We used a several-step content analysis procedure to reduce these data to a manageable and understandable form. First, we divided everything participants said in the interviews into 'thought units' (see Butterfield et al., 1996). Each thought unit comprised a single, complete thought or idea ranging in length from a phrase to one or several paragraphs. For example, the following excerpt illustrates one thought unit, which referred to a responsibility that this person had during BSO's downsizing: 'I had a role in creating the list [of who to let go] in so far as I received it, reviewed it, was aware and agreed to it' (018). As this thought unit illustrates, we placed code numbers (ranging from 001 to 040) at the end of every thought unit so that we could link the thought unit to a particular interview. Virtually everything that each participant said in their interview was broken into thought units with two exceptions: extraneous conversation that did not address the downsizing (e.g. such as the weather that day) and a participant's descriptions of work history unrelated to downsizing.

In the next step, we identified themes in the data using Turner's (1981) concept card technique. Concept cards are thematic groupings built from one's data (see Prasad, 1993) where each concept card represents a different theme in one's data. We started to create concept cards by reading through each of the thought units and placing ones that seemed conceptually similar onto the same concept card. As we started to sort the thought units into thematic groups, we created a title representing the common theme and stored each of the concept cards we had created in separate computer files. Each time we encountered a thought unit that seemed to represent a new concept, we created a new concept card computer file. For example, a number of thought units referred to participants' responsibilities in BSO's downsizing. Participants discussed that they were responsible for deciding who to let go, putting together severance packages, reworking organizational charts, etc. We placed all of these thought units referring to DAs' downsizing responsibilities onto one concept card labeled 'downsizing roles.' We followed this process until all of the thought units from all of the interviews had been categorized into concept cards. At this point, some of the concept cards only had one or a few thought units; conversely, other concept cards had many thought units. We did not eliminate concept cards that were not well-populated until later in our data analysis process.

After we had created a full set of concept cards, we re-read each of the

concept cards to ensure that all of the data on a particular concept card represented one theme and that each concept card represented a unique theme in comparison with another card. This led us to move thought units to another concept card when it appeared that they were misclassified. Also, we merged concept cards that seemed to represent the same theme. And, we divided some concept cards into more than one when it seemed to us to represent more than one theme. For example, the 'downsizing roles' concept card became unwieldy with many examples of diversity of responsibilities that people had. To achieve a more fine-grained understanding, this concept card was divided into a series of concept cards that better captured the diverse responsibilities (i.e. executioner, impressions manager, educator, and administrative execution). Table 1 illustrates an example of one of these concept cards called 'downsizing roles: administrative execution' and some of the thought units within it. At the end of this process we had a total of 98 concept cards.

Consistent with an inductive approach to qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), our next goal was to build from the concept cards toward a more general and conceptual set of findings. At this stage, we sought to understand DAs' experiences carrying out BSO's downsizing as captured in the concept cards in more theoretical terms. To do so, we conducted a literature search using the themes represented in our concept cards to guide us. We found much relevant research dealing with a range of

Table 1 Example of a concept card and thought units for 'downsizing roles: administrative execution'

I did everybody's compensation packages so I typed everybody's letter and I did all the severance pay and all that (003)
What we had to do was more administrative tasks: taking people off benefits (004)
I participated in developing the letters, making sure that we had the sufficient information in there for them to make decisions . . . The letters that people received . . . (005)
The department in general has the responsibility of making sure that everybody on the severance package, you know, that was on the severance list, received the appropriate information that, you know, our vendors that handle their benefits, their life insurance, and everything, were contacted (008)
[My job also involved] making sure outplacement was set up . . . we had them on site that day . . . (009)
I'm in charge of security for the company, yeah, I mean, it was – what had happened, it was 'Get me the names and get them off the system' . . . as soon as people were notified, you know, we terminated their i.d.s (036)

issues that seemed to be suggested by our findings thus far, such as emotions at work, stress and coping, dirty work, and responsibility and accountability at work. By comparing this published research with our own findings, we were able to conceptually group concept cards, so that we developed a smaller set of higher order categories, and to assign conceptual labels to concept cards that were previously named using just our data as a reference point. For example, based on our search of the literature, we changed the name of a concept card originally called 'rationalizing the impact of downsizing on those laid off' to 'denial of injury,' which is a construct discussed in Hong and Duff (1977) having to do with how those responsible for harming others cope by claiming that no harm was actually done to victims. As another example, insights we gleaned from research on professionals' reactions to emotionally difficult roles (i.e. Clark & LaBeff, 1982) and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress-coping research led us to group the concept cards 'emotional detachment,' 'cognitive normalizing,' and 'distancing behaviors' together as three examples of the broader conceptual category 'distancing reactions,' which we saw as ways that DAs moved away from emotionally taxing features of their responsibilities. We were also able to build explanations for the forces shaping DAs' distancing reactions through our literature search. For example, research on those with emotionally difficult work responsibilities (i.e. Clark & LaBeff, 1982; Folger & Skarlicki, 1998) was a key to providing a theoretical explanation for what we had observed in our own data – that DAs react by moving away from their responsibilities to make the emotional hardships of their work more manageable. Only at this point did we disregard concept cards with one or only a few thought units that did not seem to be central to our findings.

Finally, to test the validity of our coding and ensure that the concepts were indeed induced from – rather than imposed on – the data, a PhD-level research assistant blind to the research question coded a sample of 54 thought units into these final set of concept cards. The resultant Cohen's Kappa measure of inter-rater agreement was .73 ($p < .01$), indicating support for the credibility of the coding.

From this process of building from our data to a more conceptual understanding of DAs' experiences and reactions to their responsibilities, we built a model which is presented next in our findings section.

Playing the grim reaper at BSO

The archetype of the grim reaper is usually depicted as a mysterious cloaked character with a scythe in search of humans to escort to their death. Like the

archetype of the grim reaper who doles out death to unsuspecting humans, DAs symbolically play the grim reaper by making, assisting in, and carrying out decisions about who will stay and who will be fired in a downsizing. DAs may not only play the role of the grim reaper by doling out lay-off decisions to others, but also may be responsible for managing the negative emotions that result from the decisions they have made themselves.

Like others who come face-to-face with highly difficult workplace situations laden with negative emotions, such as physicians and 'death-tellers,' DAs at BSO were faced with intense, negative circumstances. These circumstances shaped the way they approached the tasks and how they emotionally engaged with the tasks. Specifically, the results of our study illustrate that DAs also deal with the tensions inherent to downsizing others in similar ways to physicians and death-tellers who try to find a safe distance from which to carry out their work. In Figure 1 we present the model generated directly from our findings which depicts DAs' reactions to carrying out BSO's downsizing and conditions influencing their reactions. First, the model illustrates that DAs, who were emotionally taxed by their responsibilities, reacted by emotionally, cognitively, and/or physically distancing themselves from BSO's downsizing and from the plight of those negatively impacted. Although these reactions may have not been in the best interests of BSO, we interpreted these reactions as a form of coping whereby DAs made carrying out BSO's downsizing more bearable. Their distancing also provided some DAs with the feeling that they gained a way

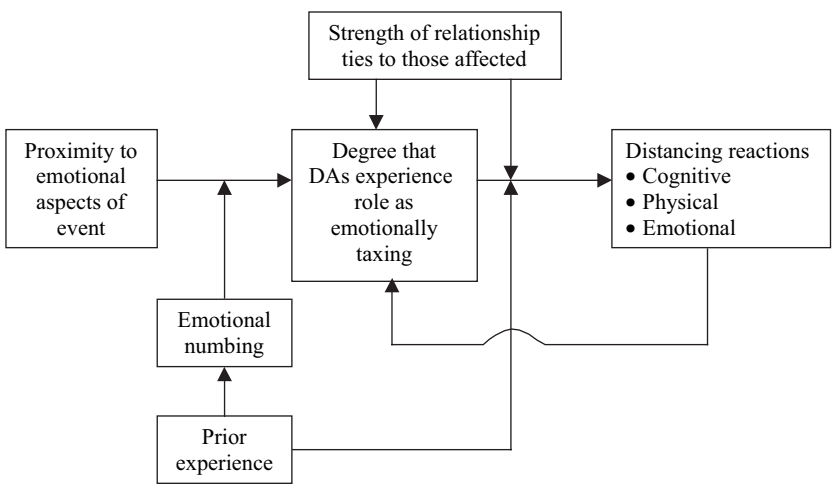

Figure 1 Model of DAs' reactions to carrying out downsizing

to stay 'objective' in the context of a situation saturated with strong emotion.

Second, Figure 1 depicts some of the conditions that DAs believed influenced their reactions. Specifically, the model illustrates that DAs whose responsibilities placed them in the 'emotional epicenter' of BSO's downsizing – where the negative impacts of BSO's downsizing were more palpable – experienced their work and the downsizing as more emotionally taxing. However, Figure 1 shows that those with prior experience in carrying out a downsizing – veterans of the DA role – described themselves as more emotionally numbed to carrying out a downsizing in general. This led them to feel less emotionally taxed. In contrast, those who had closer relational ties to those laid off in BSO's downsizing, typically DAs with greater organizational tenure, described how they were more emotionally taxed. They knew more about the details of victims' lives and were less able to distance themselves emotionally from the negative impacts of the downsizing on these individuals.

In the following sections, we explore these findings in more depth. We start with a consideration of the emotionally taxing and difficult-to-deal-with experiences of carrying out a downsizing at BSO which set the stage for DAs' distancing reactions.

The emotionally taxing and difficult-to-deal-with experiences of a DA at the emotional epicenter of BSO's downsizing

DAs' responsibilities varied with regard to how close they performed their downsizing work to the emotional epicenter of the downsizing. Those DAs solely responsible for behind-the-scenes administrative tasks such as the creation of short-term interim health insurance packages, typing letters about severance pay, taking people off company benefits lists, blocking fired employees' access to computer systems, and tracking financial numbers were relatively less exposed to this emotional epicenter. Although the DAs who carried out these administrative tasks may have been exposed to the names of those to be laid off, their work responsibilities and/or physical location tended not to bring them into direct contact with those being laid off. Furthermore, these 'distal DAs' were sometimes involved in carrying out tasks that actually *benefited* rather than *hurt* those laid off, such as creating severance packages. As a result, these DAs seemed relatively less distressed: '[The downsizing] was transparent to me . . . it wasn't people that were right outside my office. It wasn't people that I interacted with or even knew' (040).

In contrast, some DAs identified those to be laid off, executed the actual lay-offs, and/or dealt with employees immediately after the lay-offs.

Thus, they were relatively more exposed to the emotional heat of BSO's downsizing. For these DAs, there were a number of trials that made the responsibility of carrying out BSO's downsizing more difficult to deal with personally. In particular, these DAs identified that deceiving others, making tough uncertain decisions, facing others' toxic emotions, and being stigmatized by others increased the emotional trials of BSO's downsizing for them.

Deceiving others

DAs were required to keep the downsizing confidential when they were planning who was to be laid off, what procedures were to be followed, and which benefits were to be dispensed. However, rumors of downsizing ran rampant through BSO prior to the downsizing itself. Thus, these DAs were forced to deceive and lie to others to keep their secrets.

As illustrated in the following quote and in Table 2, some DAs struggled with this situation:

> On Friday (prior to the downsizing), I had an employee come to my office and say that (the COO) was telling people there were going to be position eliminations . . . And a staff person came to me and said 'am I getting a pink slip?' My job is to have things as confidential as possible. We are trained not to breathe things till they are public so (when the COO leaked the information) it looks like I am sitting there lying, bold-faced to the staff person.
>
> (012)

Deceiving others created dissonance for DAs because of the conflicting sets of role expectations and associated identities that they held in that moment (Weaver & Agle, 2002). For example, the need to keep BSO's downsizing confidential conflicted with their roles as members of a community (in which to lie or deceive others violated basic social standards) (Bandura et al., 1996). Also, from the perspective of the HR profession to which some DAs belonged, to be effective is to be concerned with the needs and development of people in an organization (Hansen et al., 1994) – a norm in direct conflict with their DA responsibilities to deceive others. DAs described that the noxious nature of this situation made them feel uncomfortable, dishonest, upset, and anxious leading up to BSO's downsizing.

Making tough uncertain decisions

DAs also discussed struggling with the challenges of making tough uncertain decisions about whom to lay off leading to BSO's downsizing. BSO's COO

Table 2 Quotes illustrating emotionally taxing experiences

Deceiving others [M][a]	A lot of people would come in and say, 'When are they going to do it? When are we going to find out?' 'Cause the word got out about two weeks ahead of time and I can't tell you how horrible it was I couldn't tell them anything. One woman came in and said, 'I know I'm going to lose my job.' She was an Office Support Manager. It was a position we could easily do without and she knew that, and I couldn't say anything and she was a good friend of mine too (003)
Making tough, uncertain decisions [S]	Very difficult . . . when you're making decisions that are as serious as those . . . not having a lot of time to evaluate people . . . a lot of anxiety on my part and the other manager's part because it was not as clean a decision as you probably would have liked to have (020)
	The one piece that we were uncomfortable with is we really were playing with just our experiences, what we thought the client – what we thought our directors thought of people, and were just taking that. The only real concrete evidence we had was the last review scores. But even those were somewhat subjective . . . (038)
Dealing with others' emotional pain [S]	You're going to have to sit down and tell them that they're going to be let go, and you . . . the reaction's pretty much, 100 percent, were very emotive – people breaking down and crying, upset . . . and the question's invariably 'Why me?' (026)
	People – they get upset, they get defensive, they get angry, they cry – it's just very difficult to sit here, at this table, with somebody across from me and tell them the bad news and have them go through all those feelings (025)
Empathy for victims [M]	It's hard when someone in front of you has two kids in college and a wife with a part-time job, and you are giving 3 months' severance . . . it's really hard . . . last time there was a couple where the wife was let go and the husband was actually demoted. That was difficult . . . so, it was always reversing roles and asking what questions would I be asking in that role (009)
	I sort of put myself in their shoes. And you know, felt 'Jeez, how would *I* feel if the same thing happened to *me*' is really what I kept dwelling on (037)
Being stigmatized [T]	People stare at you funny, they won't even say 'Hello' to you. You know, they think you made the personal decision yourself . . . What was my name for it? A grim reaper . . . (010)
	It was a tense day . . . people are walking around you, people were looking at me whenever I left my office. I felt awkward whenever I had to go to someone's office . . . (009)

[a] We depict the level of support for these findings in the following way. S = Strong support, many participants were judged to have, or expressed having, this experience and/or reaction; M = Moderate support, some participants were judged to have, or expressed having, this experience and/or reaction; T = Tentative support, a small group of participants were judged to have, or expressed having, this experience and/or reaction.

made the decision to carry out a downsizing and told managers in targeted areas of the company to work with HR to make their budget decrement targets by identifying people to lay off through quick, careful, and quiet decisions. Although time and information were limited, each decision needed to be justified and rationalized. DAs explained their struggles with decision making when there was no clear 'victim' among equally effective employees or where DAs knew that a targeted person was facing hard times (e.g. financial difficulties, divorce, etc.). The process was described as complex, chaotic, and confusing as the list of those to be laid off changed at a moment's notice, sometimes daily, as upper managers vetted HR and managerial decision making. Some DAs struggled with this situation (see also Table 2):

> You had to sit through every single individual in the comparative group, and walk through that process. Sometimes HR or Legal would say, 'You can't let this person go. You're going to have to substitute somebody else.' . . . You're going through the anguishing process of playing God with people's lives, and you have to sit back and say, you know, 'Person A is better or worse than Person B' and why in terms of their performance. And you then go through a gut-wrenching decision of saying, 'OK, so it's these 10 people that we're going to let go.'
>
> (026)

DAs recognized their decisions impacted BSO, their own area, and especially, employees' lives. Given these impacts, some DAs discussed pressure to choose the 'right' person(s) to stay or leave, under conditions of limited time, and with ambiguous and inadequate information:

> The biggest issue that I grappled with at this point, 'Am I in a position to justifiably make the decisions that I'm making about people's lives and careers?' I was somewhat uncomfortable with that. The sense was that decisions needed to be made, and we were doing it in the best manner possible given the circumstances at hand. However, I struggled with the integrity of the measurement criteria of the people I was evaluating.
>
> (020)

Dealing with others' emotional pain

DAs also struggled with having to deal with others' emotional pain and suffering. The term 'toxic handlers' describes those individuals voluntarily managing others' pain within the context of everyday organizational life (Frost, 2003). Although DAs at BSO may not have volunteered for their

roles, they nonetheless were responsible for managing others' toxic emotions during and just following BSO's lay-offs.

DAs responsible for delivering the bad news to those being laid off discussed the difficulty of informing victims and facing their reactions (see also Table 2):

> He thought he was coming in for a meeting because things were going well, and then I let him go. It is especially bad because he did get very emotional. I was dealing with a man with an English barrier . . . he was crying . . . he just didn't understand, and I don't think he ever really understood outplacement . . . I have done this a lot, and every time I still get this knot on my stomach . . . I can't really sleep the night before . . . I think without a doubt it is my least favorite thing. (006)

Some DAs also discussed dealing with employees' reactions following the lay-offs:

> Both people who I let go had desks right outside of my office, so I couldn't get away from it. So, that didn't add to my fun because then all the chat afterward was right outside of my office. The people were being displaced, they were getting their personal belongings . . . It was *horrible* because they were right *here* . . . So, it was horrible. (022)

Bandura and colleagues (1996) suggest that hurt is more tangible and difficult to deal with when people can see and hear others' suffering. As one DA explained:

> There were several people that I knew, and that I was very much acquainted with. Some of them had bought homes, they had lots of children, their spouse was unemployed, *lots* of things. I felt – my heart *bled* for them. (005)

DAs who empathized with those being laid off expressed sadness, guilt, anger, concern and worried feelings. This finding is consistent with research on crisis or trauma workers demonstrating that those who empathize with victims experience negative outcomes such as secondary traumatic stress (Figley, 1995; Grevin, 1996), burnout (Corcoran, 1989; Gross, 1994) and psychological fatigue (Figley, 1995). However, unlike workers who help trauma

victims, DAs may feel responsible for causing others' distress. This could make DAs even more likely to experience negative personal consequences if they empathize and see themselves as responsible for causing harm to those they are also charged to provide support to.

Being stigmatized

Finally, some DAs felt that they *were* grim reapers to some employees – that they had become their roles (Goffman, 1963) – and felt the brunt of employees' anger and blame (also see Table 2):

> Sometimes when I go to individuals and they look at me with fear and that 'why are you here' . . . I don't want to be thought of as 'that terminator' . . . It really is a lot of unpleasant things . . . I am in that mode of what is my role here. Am I a terminator, or is there something that I am not getting to?
>
> (006)

Schlenker (1986: 257) defines responsibility as the 'psychological adhesive that affixes an actor to an event and to the relevant prescriptions for conduct.' With regard to our study, others in BSO held some DAs publicly accountable for BSO's downsizing through their behaviors or comments. DAs, who had become stigmatized by their roles and personally answerable for the negative consequences generated by the downsizing, felt anxious and uncomfortable.

Reactions to the trials of carrying out BSO's downsizing

Early in their careers during their medical training, physicians – who also must periodically deal with intense, negative emotional situations at work – are taught implicitly through observing others' practices and explicitly through courses and mentoring how to take the stance of 'detached concern' (Lief & Fox, 1963). Detached concern is supposed to be a practice whereby physicians disconnect from the emotions of a situation to maintain objectivity and balanced decision making while simultaneously holding empathy for the patient. In practice, detached concern is also a form of coping that allows physicians to stand far enough from a situation so that they are buffered from being engulfed in the strong emotions of their work (Holman, 1990). Many physicians are masters of detachment but novices of concern, as illustrated by common complaints of physicians' poor 'bedside manners.' As illustrated in Figure 1, our analysis revealed that many DAs also dealt

with the trials of carrying out BSO's downsizing through detachment by emotionally, cognitively, and physically distancing from the epicenter of BSO's downsizing. By distancing themselves from a close attachment with downsizing events, DAs were able to deal with its emotional 'heat,' thereby allowing them to complete their work while also reducing their own personal distress. Rather than an explicit practice to improve performance, DAs' movement appeared to be a defensive reaction. In many cases, DAs described not only these reactions, but also the reasons for them; they were aware of their own defensive behaviors. In other instances, we observed these reactions as themes in our data even though DAs seemed to be unaware of their reactions. We explain these reactions next.

Emotional distancing

A first way that DAs used to deal with this emotional heat was to detach themselves from the emotions of others' plight. We defined emotional distancing as the process by which one psychologically cuts oneself off from the negative emotions associated with a particular situation or relationship. DAs described various tactics for emotional distancing (see Table 3 for illustrations). For example, one DA discussed the use of humor:

> We never poked fun at any particular person. I think we just poked fun at what could have happened . . . I mean, we were all just trying to kind of go with the flow . . . not let it affect us . . . you know joke about it to try to make us feel better . . . But, I think in our hearts, we kind of joked about it to not let it directly emotionally affect us.
>
> (008)

Another DA discussed how others depersonalized those being laid off by removing personal identities:

> I found that to be pretty odd, that the people that we work with every day, have personal relationships with, are all of a sudden just last names [on a list of people to be laid off] . . . I think that it's a defense mechanism, when you start referring to someone who has been a friend just by their last name, and it's certainly not evidence of the fact that we are all cold, heartless people who don't care anymore.
>
> (022)

These quotes illustrate the participants' explicit awareness of their behaviors and reasons for them. DAs sought to feel better in an otherwise

Table 3 Quotes illustrating distancing reactions

Emotionally distancing [S]	You almost have to get cold to get through it, and get over it . . . (009)
Cognitive distancing through neutralization	
Theme 1: Normalizing [S]	You really have to put all of that aside [i.e. your personal concerns] when you are involved in the process . . . and you just need to sign up and say 'I have a position in this company and I earn my living in this company and it has been a good life to date. We hemmed and hawed and now it is time to make this happen as well as can be.' We do what we have to do . . . It is like a day when you have a client presentation. You just want to get through it, you're not totally sure what you did, at the end you are extremely tired (021)
Theme 2: Denial of injury [S]	I've seen a lot of people come out of these situations and do better . . . I don't think you're doing any kindness for them by leaving them like the walking dead around the organization, and people use them as the butts of jokes . . . I've seen a lot of people . . . land better and be productive (015)
Theme 3: Justice and fairness [M]	It's a difficult process. You want to try to make it as humane as you possibly can . . . because it's a very traumatic experience. And anybody that's been through it I'm sure would agree . . . I think we were very humane (026)
Physical distancing behaviors	
Theme 1: Avoidance of contact [T]	I stayed in my office . . . I was afraid of being the grim reaper . . . people don't want to see you . . . don't want to talk to you . . . (014)
	It was almost like the natural reaction was to hide in your office, stay low key, not be so visible (031)
Theme 2: Sanitizing behaviors [S]	I'm very firm about, 'Here's the facts.' . . . I don't create, in a prepared speech, a lot of allowances for a long discourse . . . I'm going to short circuit it every time out. It's *over*. I mean, you know, it's short. It's not an interview. I'm going to short circuit it because there's nowhere to *go*. You don't want to talk about why he and not the other person, and 'Why me?' You don't go into details. You just state, 'I just feel that I can eliminate your position.' Da da da dum . . . (022)

heart-wrenching situation where they had caused emotional pain and hurt to others (Bandura et al., 1996; Cordes & Dougherty, 1993) and to feel better prepared to make decisions about who to lay off in a more rational and objective fashion (Ashforth & Lee, 1990).

Cognitive reframing through neutralization techniques

A second form of distancing described by DAs was cognitive reframing through neutralization techniques. Reframing through neutralization techniques (Hong & Duff, 1977; Sykes & Matza, 1957) is a cognitive process in which an individual reframes the negative aspects of a situation in a more positive or at least neutral light. Doing so allows a person to avoid blame for actual or anticipated negative outcomes of a situation (Ashforth & Lee, 1990) and makes it easier to carry out harmful actions (Bandura et al., 1996). Neutralization techniques serve as a form of cognitive distancing, allowing DAs to remain less emotionally involved in BSO's downsizing and the fate of those let go. We observed that DAs engaged in several types of cognitive distancing.

First, DAs engaged in normalizing, which we defined as framing BSO's downsizing as an inevitable part of corporate life. As described by one participant, normalizing allowed DAs to appease feelings of personal responsibility or concern for causing harm to others in the organization because being laid off was framed as a membership rite in corporate America:

> The way I deal with it is you chose the business world and this is what you get . . . that is how it is . . . the thing that is on our side with this is that every time you pick up the paper another company is downsizing, it is happening all over, it is a harsh reality.
>
> (006)

A second neutralization technique was 'denial of injury' (Hong & Duff, 1977), where DAs maintained that no harm was actually done to those laid off in BSO's downsizing. One respondent commented:

> After three beers I learned that he felt it was time to move on anyway. All the people I know who it happened to either chose it or saw it as an opportunity to get off their butt and do something else . . . Now I don't know the stories of people who are not working, but a lot of the people really benefited.
>
> (004)

As these quotes and Table 3 illustrate, some DAs asserted that BSO's downsizing allowed those laid off to leave unsatisfying jobs, provided them with

significant severance pay, and led to even better job opportunities. Although we did not collect data attesting to the real outcomes for those laid off, a number of DAs described that a belief in good outcomes helped them feel better about letting people go.

A final neutralization technique involved perceptions of justice and fairness. First, DAs discussed feeling less worried and anxious if they believed that those being laid off were treated justly and fairly:

> The people I was involved with laying off felt very comfortable with the package that they were getting, and allowing them to get to their next position, whether it be starting a new company or starting a new position . . . we felt good about what we were doing from the company perspective in helping people get to their next assignments, that I felt OK with the whole process.
>
> (002)

Second, others discussed feeling appeased by a belief that decisions about whom to lay off were just and fair (whether or not this was true in practice):

> There were people who it was truly mutual, that people were not performing in their role as viewed by the manager, and the people in that role were not happy . . . they basically either quietly raised their hands and said 'Get me out of here' or when they were addressed, they said 'Fine. That's no problem.' So it *truly* was mutual.
>
> (015)

Physical distancing behaviors

We labeled a final form of distancing 'physical distancing behaviors.' Building on prior research (Clark & LaBeff, 1982; Schlenker et al., 1991), we defined distancing behaviors as actions taken by people to avoid or prematurely leave situations where they anticipated social difficulties and/or social anxieties. The data revealed two types of distancing behaviors, avoidance of contact and sanitizing behaviors.

'Avoidance of contact,' was a constellation of behaviors comprising DAs' attempts to avoid direct contact with other employees. Some DAs discussed physical avoidance tactics that involved hiding in their office, staying out of sight, and 'lying low' (see also Table 3):

> One of the problems is that I walk the floor a lot, and I am visible. I tend to say 'Hi, how are you today?' That's not a question you ask somebody going down in the elevator 'cause they were just let go, let's put it that

> way. So, I decided my safe haven was to be less visible for three days . . . I stayed in my office. I didn't come out for several days!
>
> (005)

Physical avoidance helped these DAs to avoid needy or emotionally distraught employees, to avoid being scrutinized and blamed for the downsizing, and to emotionally detach from the impacts of BSO's downsizing on others.

Second, 'sanitizing behaviors' involved DAs' attempts to eliminate opportunities for emotional expression – their own and others – by controlling the physical conditions and the mechanical processes of carrying out BSO's downsizing. DAs discussed tactics used to structure BSO's downsizing to minimize the possibility of emotional expression:

> We try to minimize the conversation that is bound to take place between the manager and the employee . . . like 'Why me?' . . . and you know that it is just going to get into an emotional discussion . . . which is why the three of us meet and the manager leaves, because the chances of that discussion, of basically trying to talk us out of it, is far less likely to happen with us [HR generalists] than with the manager . . . I try to change the emotion out of it to move to severance and benefits continuation, even though it is not sinking in.
>
> (006)

DAs tried to minimize their own and others' emotional reactions and expressions. Furthermore, they changed the topic if those being laid off were getting too emotional, moved through the termination script without attending to an employee's reactions, or quickly handed over a laid-off employee to a potentially unfamiliar HR generalist.

Research suggests that sanitizing behaviors serve several purposes. Professionals exposed to others' misery through their work use sanitizing behaviors to align emotional expression with norms of rationality and neutrality at work (Krone & Morgan, 2000), to distance themselves from others' misery (Holman, 1990), and to remain in control of themselves and their situation (Clark & LaBeff, 1982).

The role of prior experience

As illustrated in Figure 1, participants reported that past experiences with downsizing reduced the emotional impact of BSO's downsizing for them (also see Table 4):

Table 4 Quotes illustrating factors that shaped DAs' reactions

Proximity to emotional epicenter [S]	In terms of organizational structure, we [the benefits representatives] are behind the scenes . . . the generalists are on the front line during a downsizing (004)
	[The downsizing] came quickly and I am not sure why that is . . . maybe I was far away from it . . . further than I was usually at the '91 one (021)
Prior downsizing experience [M]	You're not as shocked by it because you've been through it before and you realize that everybody's business is doing this right now (003)
	It used to [get to me to have to lay off people] there for a while but it just happened so much that . . . I mean it's part of the job . . . I guess I've done it so much that it doesn't really bother me anymore . . . it's tough at first though (010)
Relational ties with victims [S]	I was so new at the time, my perception was 'Why are you wasting the time [getting concerned about how people might react]?' I mean, it's no big deal . . . I was too new to know the faces and the names . . . [later] I kind of knew a little bit more people that were affected . . . (008)

> Telling somebody that they're going to have no position with the organization is never easy to do. But, I've gotten accustomed to having to manage through those, so it was really at that time, just one other thing that had to be managed.
>
> (011)

Past experience gave DAs insight into what to expect and led them to feel less shocked and uncertain – they could engage in anticipatory coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Downsizing others became a normal part of business and their jobs; thus, they were equipped to use the reframing technique of normalizing. Prior experiences also led DAs to be less emotionally engaged with BSO's downsizing from the beginning of the process, focusing more on the task at hand and less on the emotional reactions to it. This is a common mechanism employed to disengage preemptively from situations known to be emotionally charged (Bandura, 2002). As discussed by Van Maanen and Kunda (1989), frequent repetition blunts felt emotion, leading to emotional numbness. Figure 1 illustrates this link between past experiences downsizing others and emotional numbing reactions.

Relational ties with those laid off

Finally, Figure 1 illustrates our findings that DAs felt more taxed when they had closer relational ties with those laid off in of BSO's downsizing. These DAs with personal relationships, especially those with ties that were a long-lasting result of greater tenure, had deeper connections to and insight into colleagues' and employees' lives outside of work. Those DAs tended to worry about and empathize more with their close colleagues and employees. Having emotional connections and knowing the details of others' lives – that they had children, a sick father, a pregnant wife, etc. – seemed to make DAs less able to depersonalize their responsibilities (also see Table 4):

> I had such long tenure at the other place, *I knew* the people, *I worked* with them. So, when you *know* [about the downsizing] and they're pumping you 'Am I going to be laid off?' and you *know* them personally, I always found that to be hard. I don't think I knew the people [here] as well, so I could be more objective. I mean, typically when you know them, you know their *family* life, you know the *kids* or the single mom or whatever.
>
> (010)

Discussion

This article reported a qualitative study that explored how employees who are responsible for carrying out a downsizing – 'downsizing agents' (DAs) – experience and react to their responsibilities. Our results demonstrate that, when the work of carrying out a downsizing becomes taxing, DAs react by cognitively, emotionally, and physically distancing themselves from their roles. We explore forces that make carrying out a downsizing more taxing for DAs and the conditions under which their distancing reactions become more likely.

Implications for research

The findings that we presented in this article have several implications for organizational research. First, we found there are tensions inherent in DAs' having compassion and empathizing with those laid off, yet also seeking ways to distance from the downsizing task and its victims. Parker and Axtell (2001) recently wrote about the benefits of perspective taking, which entails adopting another person's viewpoint and is an antecedent condition to empathy. Other authors (Fisher & Torbert, 1992; Trevino, 1992) have also argued that the

ability to be engaged interpersonally, taking the perspective of and empathizing with another, is the hallmark of effective and highly developed leaders. Yet, as Figley (1995) and Grevin (1996) note, empathizing can come at a distinct cost in the form of 'compassion fatigue.' The DAs in this study were caught in the midst of this tension. Although they felt that it was humane to empathize and grieve with those laid off, they also felt the need to distance themselves from this reaction to preserve their own well-being.

The tension between compassion and dispassion needs to be better understood in theorizing about emotions in organizations. With the ever-increasing interest in the role emotions play in organizations (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995), scholars have to be attuned to the possibility of a loss of emotion, or emotional 'numbing,' as an outcome of aspects of organizational life characterized by continual, stressful change (Kets de Vries, 1999). It may very well be functionally adaptive for individuals to engage in behaviors and cognitions to remove themselves from toxic organizational situations. This may particularly be the case for individuals, such as some DAs, who find themselves carrying out actions they feel are wrong or that bring harm to others. Attempting to carry out such actions with empathy for those laid off in a downsizing can result in intense negative emotions. To counter negative emotional reactions, individuals become dispassionate actors, conducting the deed with little or no concern for their victims. Future research concerning DAs or other organizational actors carrying out undesirable acts needs to reveal the tension inherent in the actors' balancing between compassion and dispassion. In addition, research might explore whether the most effective DAs engage in a practice of 'detached concern,' like that imparted to physicians-in-training.

Prevalence of distancing reactions described by the DAs at BSO complicates the managerial control perspective offered by Dewitt et al. (2003). These authors argue that DAs can have varying degrees of formal control over lay-off decision criteria and procedures, where high-control managers are empowered to lay off whomever and however they wish and low-control managers lay off those whom they are directed to lay off in a prescribed manner. The experience of DAs, Dewitt et al. (2003) argue, is a function of how the actual degree of control exercised interacts with the degree of control preferred by the DA. The findings in this article illustrate how DAs also exercised informal control over their distancing reactions, enacting emotional, cognitive, and physical strategies to separate themselves from the event and the victims. Even those DAs who had low formal control – in that they were given scripts and told whom to lay off – expressed the ways in which they exercised considerably more control over how close they remained to the event. The strongest constraint on control over distancing came from the DAs' strength of the relational ties with those let go; they

were less able to distance themselves from those victims with whom they were personally close. Future studies might explore these complexities, investigating how actual and preferred formal control interact with actual and preferred informal control over distancing reactions.

The present study also has implications for research on dirty work in organizations, which is concerned with work – such as garbage collection or used car sales – that is seen as tainted by society (Hughes, 1958). In Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) model of how people in stigmatized professions coped with the stigma, a strong occupational subculture emerged as an important lever of coping. In contrast, DAs were not in stigmatized professions, but their task was marked by social taint, rendering them at least temporarily stigmatized. There was, however, no strong DA subculture on which they could rely and with which they might rally their defenses to the stigma. The coping mechanisms were, therefore, more personal and less collective, and may then be more tenuous and prone to fail. DAs and others who are fulfilling a dirty role, unlike people who hold dirty jobs, are perhaps more likely to be unskilled and unpracticed at engaging in protective strategies.

The ability to cope with performing a dirty role is likely to increase with repeated experience. As Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) imply, veteran DAs are likely to have developed a viable ideology for the role, thereby making their reframing of the situation more credible to them. When veterans cognitively reframe downsizing as a normal part of business life, deny that those being laid off are injured, or see downsizing as a just and fair process, their experiences help them believe their reframings are correct.

Implications for practice

This study also holds several implications for practice. First, it is important to understand the impact of downsizing on the DAs. Although our knowledge and understanding of the experience of downsizing victims and survivors have grown, we are only beginning to see the real, deleterious effects of downsizing on a unique subset of downsizing survivors: the people carrying it out. DAs suffer through the negative emotions associated with planning and executing a downsizing event. Knowing that DAs can experience appreciable distress, organizations planning a downsizing event should provide DAs with the required training and support. This training should address the fact that it is natural and understandable for DAs to experience a negative emotional reaction and provide resources to help the agents cope with this reaction. Training could also address that it is common for DAs to engage in various coping behaviors, and provide a forum for social support. DAs might benefit from support groups during a downsizing that help them cope with the

distress they encounter throughout the downsizing process. The state of Colorado, for example, provides, through an employee assistance program, training resources to managers within the government concerning how best to conduct a fair downsizing while maintaining the managers' emotional well-being (Colorado Department of Human Resources, 2004).

Although it may be functionally adaptive for DAs to engage in coping strategies, it may in fact be maladaptive for the organization. When DAs detach emotionally from the event or distance themselves physically as a functionally adaptive form of self-protection, the results for the organization can be detrimental. The survivors of the downsizing might not recognize such coping behaviors to be motivated by an attempt at self-preservation, and may instead attribute the behaviors to callousness or being uncaring. Therefore, when compassion, as we have seen, leads to negative outcomes for the DA, it is perhaps not sustainable and the result is a less-effective downsizing. This phenomenon might help explain why some downsizing attempts are less effective in practice than others.

The practical relationship between desired compassion and actual dispassion would probably exhibit the most acute tension in veteran DAs. Managers or HR personnel involved in repeatedly carrying out downsizing might develop a well-worn and self-preserving stock of anticipatory coping strategies, and as such, they might have the most difficulty summoning the compassion assumed to be necessary for an effective downsizing. Training for veteran DAs might be needed to highlight the negative effects on the organization if they approached their task only with dispassion and to encourage them to take steps toward compassion when carrying out their duties.

Finally, one model for DAs' handling and balancing the potentially competing motives of displaying compassion yet practicing a safe amount of dispassion is suggested in the medical literature. Historically, physicians who engaged in detached concern or 'clinical distance' (Lief & Fox, 1963) tended to experience reduced effectiveness (i.e. missed diagnostic data) from this distancing (Coulehan, 1995). New models encourage physicians to be emotionally resilient (Coulehan, 1995) by being mindful and reflective of how their emotions are affected by the emotions of another, enabling them to exercise enough compassion to be effective, yet still be able to protect their own well-being. Likewise, DAs may be most effective when they, too, are able to practice emotional resilience when engaging in the unpleasant task of downsizing.

Limitations

Although the findings in this study add to our understanding of how DAs experience a downsizing, the research was exploratory, and its findings may

have several limitations. First, we conducted the research at one organization, and concerning one downsizing. Many of the experiences of the DAs at BSO plausibly represent the broad challenges of this role. However, only replication and extension of this study can show which responses we found are unique only to BSO. For example, few DAs in this study saw the downsizing in overtly positive terms or as truly beneficial to those downsized. It is imaginable that a downsizing might be conducted whereby only those who deeply wish to be let go are let go, and future research might characterize how the DAs' experience is different under those conditions. Also, the downsizing in which these DAs participated was a relatively small event. Here, only 50 people (albeit many highly visible executives and managers) were let go; the results may be different for large-scale events in which hundreds or thousands of people are downsized. Finally, the interviews we conducted were retrospective in nature, which is less desirable than a longitudinal design that might capture the DAs' experiences throughout the downsizing planning and execution. By asking open-ended questions and allowing informants to freely share their experience, however, our data collection methods helped to avoid some of the problems with retrospective accounts (Miller et al., 1997).

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