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MICHAEL HIMMLEGAARD,
Doctoral Student at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan (9RF7+7P5, Hüseyn Cavid Prospect, Baki, Az 1073, Azerbaijan)
michael.himmlegaard@outlook.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5963-0279

Institutional trauma and collective memory in the welfare sector: a philosophical-sociological analysis of moral order and epistemic rupture

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Across European welfare states, public care institutions have, over the last decade, repeatedly been thrust into the spotlight through scandals concerning neglect, violence, administrative concealment, and moral breakdown. These crises have triggered intense debates about trust, legitimacy, and accountability in the welfare sector. Much of this discussion has focused on policy design, resource allocation or managerial failure. What remains less explored is how such crises transform the *moral and epistemic fabric* of institutions themselves, and how they leave lasting traces in the collective memory of staff.

Building on author's (Himmlegaard, 2025) philosophical sociology, this article approaches welfare institutions as *moral fields* rather than merely bureaucratic entities. As moral fields, institutions are arenas in which legitimacy, recognition and responsibility are continuously negotiated through interaction rituals, discursive practices and historically sedimented categories of thought. When a crisis erupts – through investigative journalism, internal whistleblowing, or external regulatory scrutiny – it does not simply "damage reputation"; it destabilizes the shared assumptions that previously made professional roles, rules and routines appear morally meaningful. In other words, the crisis is experienced as a *trauma* at the level of the institution.

1.2. Research Problem

The concept of trauma has travelled a long intellectual distance from its psychiatric origins, entering sociological theory primarily through work on collective and cultural trauma (Sztompka, 2000). While this scholarship has generated influential accounts

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of how communities reinterpret ruptures of national or historical significance, it has, perhaps inadvertently, normalised a focus on the spectacular. Wars, state repression, and regime collapses dominate the analytical landscape, leaving comparatively little room for the more insidious disruptions that take hold in ordinary institutional life. It is tempting to assume that these "everyday" disturbances fall outside the domain of trauma analysis; yet recent work suggests that such an assumption risks obscuring processes that are both analytically consequential and empirically widespread.

A growing strand of contemporary research points to the institution itself – not the external catastrophe – as a potential source of ongoing harm, contradiction, and moral strain. Alexander (2023), for example, examines how frontline workers in welfare bureaucracies engage in what he terms "moral recalibration," a process through which they continually reinterpret organisational wrongdoing in order to preserve a workable moral horizon. His analysis subtly dislodges the conventional image of trauma as a singular rupture, instead revealing how protracted tensions between institutional mandates and lived professional ethics can accumulate into forms of harm that resist easy classification. A parallel line of enquiry is developed by Harris and Robson (2022), whose work on institutional moral injury demonstrates how long-term exposure to ethically compromised structures corrodes professional identity and undermines the collective frameworks staff rely on to sustain legitimacy. Their findings complicate familiar narratives of burnout by reframing it as a symptom of deeper epistemic fragilities embedded within organisational routines.

A further refinement comes from Lloyd and colleagues (2024), who explore how institutions handle the aftermath of internal crises through practices of selective remembering and forgetting. Their notion of "mnemonic boundary-work" highlights the ways organisations actively curate narratives of harm – acknowledging certain episodes while carefully sidelining others – in attempts to stabilise both internal cohesion and external accountability. What emerges is a picture of trauma not as an event but as a contested process: shaped by competing interpretations, institutional interests, and the politics of organisational memory.

Taken together, these contributions signal an important conceptual shift. Trauma is increasingly understood as a dynamic and relational property of institutional life rather than the residue of an extraordinary external shock. Yet despite their advances, these studies remain only partially integrated. Each addresses one facet – moral injury, epistemic destabilisation, or institutional memory – but the literature has not yet examined how these dimensions interlock during periods of organisational crisis. The absence of such integration leaves open the possibility that key transformations remain analytically invisible.

It is in this conceptual space that the present article intervenes. It asks how crises in welfare institutions unsettle and reconfigure three interdependent domains:

1. **collective identity and moral meaning among staff;**
2. **epistemic orders that underpin professional judgment and organisational legitimacy;** and
3. **mnemonic practices through which institutions remember, reinterpret, and sometimes suppress their own histories.**

Rather than treating trauma as a clinical diagnosis, the article develops institutional trauma as a theoretical lens – a means of grasping the subtle, often ambivalent reconfigurations of meaning, knowledge, and memory that emerge when organisations confront, deny, or attempt to absorb their own failures. The aim is not merely to broaden the scope of trauma studies but to illuminate the sociological mechanisms through which institutional life becomes, at times, a site of harm in its own right.

1.3. Purpose and Scope

The purpose of the article is to develop a *conceptually robust* and *sociologically grounded* account of institutional trauma as a relational and epistemic process embedded in the moral fields of welfare organizations. Rather than providing a conventional empirical case study, the article offers a theoretically oriented analysis based on a purposively selected corpus of narratives and documents from documented crises in welfare institutions in European welfare states. These materials – staff testimonies, internal reports, public inquiries, and media investigations – are treated as *mnemonic artefacts* through which institutions and their members reflect upon crises.

The scope is twofold. First, the article proposes a theoretical model that synthesizes author's philosophical sociology with key strands in classical and contemporary social theory: Durkheim and Mannheim on the social origins of thought, Bourdieu on fields and symbolic capital, Collins on interaction rituals, Sztompka on cultural trauma, and the literature on social memory (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). Second, it uses this model to interpret recurring patterns in the narratives surrounding welfare-sector crises, with particular attention to moral breakdown, epistemic disorientation and rituals of repair.

1.4. Positioning the Theoretical Synthesis

The theoretical ambition of the article is explicit from the outset: no single classical framework is sufficient to grasp the layered nature of institutional trauma. Durkheim helps illuminate normative breakdown; Mannheim clarifies how knowledge is bound to social position; Bourdieu reveals struggles over symbolic capital; Collins shows how emotional energy circulates through interaction rituals; Sztompka conceptualizes trauma as a culturally mediated shock to a social order; and memory studies trace how such shocks are later narrativized.

The article therefore advances a *deliberately pluralist* but *internally coherent* synthesis. These theorists are not assembled eclectically; they are mobilized to address a specific puzzle: how crises in welfare institutions unsettle the moral, epistemic, and mnemonic orders that sustain professional life, and how these orders are subsequently re-stitched.

1.5. Structure of the Article

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework, beginning with the author's philosophical sociology and moving through conceptualizations of institutional trauma, fields, and interaction rituals, before situating the argument within the state of the art in cultural trauma and memory

studies. Section 3 outlines the methodological orientation and data corpus, clarifying units of analysis and the status of the narratives under examination. Section 4 presents an analytically driven reconstruction of three interconnected dimensions of institutional trauma: moral collapse, epistemic disorientation, and reconstructive rituals. Section 5 discusses the broader theoretical and societal implications, and Section 6 concludes by highlighting avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Philosophical Sociology and the Social Origins of Institutional Knowledge

The author's philosophical sociology (Himmlegaard, 2025) starts from the premise that philosophical and moral reasoning are not autonomous intellectual acts but socially conditioned forms of knowledge. Drawing on Durkheim and Mannheim, the author recasts cognition as a *collective accomplishment* rooted in historically specific thought styles, institutional structures, and symbolic hierarchies. What an organization "knows" about itself – its legitimacy, moral purpose, or professional ethos – is not a neutral self-description but a product of social struggles, interpretive traditions, and institutionalized categories.

Durkheim's analysis of collective representations (1912/1995) offers a starting point. Categories such as "justice," "responsibility" or "care" are not derived from abstract rational reflection; they crystallize in and through social practices. The author applies this insight to welfare institutions, arguing that their ethical vocabularies – what counts as "good care," "risk," or "harm" – are historically and organizationally produced (Himmlegaard, 2025). Institutional trauma, in this register, becomes a rupture in the collective representations that underwrite moral coherence.

Mannheim's (1936) sociology of knowledge extends this argument by foregrounding *existential location* – the idea that what actors can see, say and justify is conditioned by their social position and generational horizon. The author reworks Mannheim's notion into an institutional key: professional groups within welfare systems occupy distinct *epistemic locations* that structure their access to information, their interpretive repertoires, and their moral vocabularies (Himmlegaard, 2025). When a crisis erupts, these locations become acutely visible as competing vantage points on "what happened" and "what it means."

2.2. Institutional Trauma as Epistemic Rupture

Building on this foundation, the article conceptualizes *institutional trauma* as an *epistemic rupture* – a breakdown in the tacit mechanisms that sustain meaning, recognition and moral order. Rather than viewing trauma as a cluster of individual symptoms, the focus is on the institutional processes through which taken-for-granted certainties collapse.

Here, Durkheim's (1897/1951) concept of *anomie* is instructive. Anomie is not merely the absence of norms but a state in which previously binding rules lose their grip, leaving actors disoriented. Transposed to the institutional level, trauma appears

as a moment when core categories – "safety," "professional judgment," "best interest of the client" – become contested or suspect. Staff may continue to perform their duties, but their confidence in what those duties *mean* is shaken.

The author emphasizes that such ruptures are *epistemic* as well as moral (Himmlegaard, 2025). When epistemic frameworks disintegrate, actors confront not only practical uncertainty but a crisis of justification. Practices of reporting, documenting, or deciding no longer carry unproblematic authority. Language that once stabilized expectations – "according to guidelines," "as required by policy" – begins to ring hollow. Institutional trauma, as used here, thus sits at the intersection of cognition and morality: it is a failure of meaning, a failure of coordination and a failure of justification.

2.3. Cultural and Institutional Trauma: From Sztompka to Welfare Organizations

Sztompka's (2000) influential formulation of *cultural trauma* as "the other face of social change" provides a bridge between macro-level transformations and institutional crises. He defines cultural trauma as a culturally mediated shock to the "cultural tissue" of a society – a disruption of interpretive schemes and value systems, rather than a series of isolated psychological wounds. The traumatic sequence, in his account, involves the identification of a rupture, its public framing, the search for causes and culprits, and the elaboration of coping strategies.

Transposed to welfare institutions, Sztompka's model suggests that organizational crises can be read as *localized cultural traumas*. A scandal exposes the gap between institutional self-image (as protector, healer, guarantor of dignity) and publicly visible practices (neglect, coercion, cover-up). The institution's "cultural tissue" – its moral narratives, symbols, and rituals – is torn. What follows is a sequence of interpretive work: inquiries, reports, apologies, reforms, and sometimes denial or minimization.

The notion of institutional trauma developed here is thus in dialogue with Sztompka but shifts the analytical focus. Rather than treating trauma as a property of whole societies, the article examines how it unfolds within *specific moral fields* where professional roles, hierarchies and interaction rituals mediate its effects.

2.4. Fields, Capital, and Symbolic Violence

Bourdieu's (1984, 1990, 2003) theory of fields offers tools for understanding how institutional trauma reshapes power relations. Welfare institutions are not homogeneous organizations; they are structured fields in which actors – managers, frontline workers, experts, regulators – compete for *symbolic capital*: moral credibility, professional authority, and interpretive power.

Crises reconfigure these distributions of capital. Actors who previously embodied institutional virtue may find their authority questioned; marginal voices – whistleblowers, critical professionals – may temporarily gain credibility. The very language of "care," "protection" or "risk management" functions as symbolic power: it authorizes some interventions and delegitimizes others. In moments of trauma, this symbolic violence becomes more visible, as struggles over "what really happened" and "what counts as abuse" intensify.

The author converges with Bourdieu in insisting on *reflexive sociology*: analysts must situate their own categories within the field they study (Himmlegaard, 2025). Concepts such as "trauma," "institutional failure" or "systemic abuse" are not neutral descriptors; they carry moral and political weight. A reflexive approach acknowledges this, turning conceptual work into part of the object of inquiry.

2.5. Interaction Ritual Chains and Emotional Energy

Collins's (2004) theory of interaction ritual chains adds an affective and micro-sociological dimension. In stable conditions, institutions reproduce solidarity through recurrent rituals: staff meetings, debriefings, training sessions, informal gatherings. These gatherings generate *emotional energy* – confidence, trust, a sense of shared purpose – when they are perceived as legitimate and inclusive.

Crisis disrupts these chains. Meetings become tense, defensive or performative; staff avoid participation; silence replaces spontaneous talk. Emotional energy drains from the institutional environment, reinforcing experiences of isolation and cynicism. Institutional trauma, in this view, is not only a cognitive and moral rupture but a collapse in the circuits of emotional energy that sustain everyday cooperation.

Reconstructive efforts – apology ceremonies, commemorations, reform workshops – can be understood as attempts to restart positive interaction rituals. Whether they succeed depends not only on formal design but on whether participants perceive them as authentic opportunities for recognition and repair – or as mere bureaucratic performances.

2.6. Collective Memory, Mnemonic Practices, and the State of the Art

The final pillar of the theoretical framework is the sociology of memory. Halbwachs's (1992) classic argument that individual recollection is always organized through *social frameworks* remains foundational: what institutions and their members remember or forget is shaped by group norms, power relations and available narrative templates.

Olick and Robbins (1998) reconceptualize "social memory studies" as a historical sociology of *mnemonic practices* – the concrete ways in which groups commemorate, institutionalize and contest interpretations of the past. Their work shifts attention from memory as a static "thing" to memory as ongoing practice. Olick (1999) further distinguishes between individualist and collectivist understandings of collective memory, emphasizing how public narratives and institutional scripts constrain what can be remembered.

Tavory and Eliasoph's (2013) theory of *anticipation* complements this perspective by showing how actors coordinate futures through "protentions," trajectories and temporal landscapes. For institutions dealing with trauma, mnemonic practices are inseparable from anticipatory work: how the past is narrated delimits what futures can be imagined as legitimate or desirable.

Positioned within this state of the art, the present article contributes in three ways. First, it brings the literature on cultural trauma (Sztompka, 2000) into closer dialogue with the sociology of organizations and welfare institutions. Second, it specifies *institutional trauma* as a meso-level phenomenon located between macro-level cultural traumas and micro-level psychological experiences. Third, it links mnemonic

practices to *epistemic orders*, arguing that what institutions remember is not only morally but also cognitively structured: it reorganizes what counts as valid knowledge about "how this institution works" and "what went wrong."

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Units of Analysis

The study adopts an interpretive, theoretically driven research design. Its primary goal is not empirical generalization but *conceptual clarification*: to elaborate institutional trauma as a sociological phenomenon.

Two analytically distinct but interrelated units of analysis guide the investigation:

1. **Institutions as moral fields** – welfare organizations understood as sites where moral categories, epistemic orders and mnemonic practices are produced and contested.
2. **Staff as bearers of institutional meaning** – welfare professionals whose narratives articulate how institutional orders are experienced, disrupted and repaired.

Institutional trauma is thus not reduced to either level. Instead, staff narratives are treated as privileged windows into the ways in which institutional fields are lived, justified, and reconfigured.

3.2. Data Corpus and Setting

The empirical illustrations are drawn from a purposively assembled corpus of textual materials concerning documented crises in welfare institutions in European welfare states. The corpus comprises:

1. **Staff testimonies and narrative accounts** – anonymized interviews, written reflections and public testimonies by social workers, caregivers, nurses, and administrators who describe working in institutions undergoing scandal or intense external scrutiny.
2. **Internal and semi-public institutional documents** – extracts from inquiry reports, reflexive memoranda, incident analyses and organizational self-evaluations addressing moral or administrative breakdowns.
3. **Public representations** – media investigations, regulatory reports and press statements that frame the crises and their aftermath for wider publics.

The corpus does not constitute a representative sample of all welfare institutions. Rather, it is *theoretically sampled* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, via later interpretive work) to capture a range of institutional contexts – child protection, elder care, mental health, and related welfare domains – where moral crises have been publicly documented. Individual cases are not named and identifying details have been removed or altered to protect confidentiality. The resulting narratives are therefore *composite*: they synthesize recurrent patterns across multiple documented cases.

3.3. Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeds in three iterative stages, inspired by hermeneutic and critical discourse-analytic approaches (Fairclough, 2013) and informed by the theoretical framework outlined above:

1. **Contextual reconstruction** – Each text is first situated within its institutional and historical context: the type of welfare service involved, the nature of the scandal or crisis, and the broader public debate surrounding it. This step does not aim for exhaustive case histories but for sufficient contextualization to interpret the moral and epistemic stakes.
2. **Interpretive coding of meaning structures** – Narratives and documents are then coded for recurring motifs: expressions of moral collapse (e.g., "we stopped believing in what we were doing"), epistemic disorientation (e.g., "we followed the guidelines, but everything still felt wrong"), and reconstructive efforts ("we promised ourselves this would never happen again"). Codes also capture references to interaction rituals (meetings, handovers, ceremonies) and mnemonic practices (commemorations, references to "lessons learned").
3. **Theoretical integration** – Finally, the coded material is read through the lenses of the author's philosophical sociology (Himmlegaard, 2025), Bourdieu's field theory, Collins's interaction ritual chains, Sztompka's cultural trauma and social memory studies. This does not involve applying theory mechanically; rather, the material is used to refine and sometimes subtly challenge the theoretical concepts. For example, moments described by staff as "burnout" are reinterpreted as manifestations of an institutional crisis of meaning.

Throughout, narratives are treated as *social practices* rather than neutral reflections of "facts." They are performances in which actors position themselves, attribute responsibility and negotiate what the crisis *means* (Olick & Robbins, 1998). The analysis therefore pays as much attention to silences, euphemisms and justificatory tropes as to explicit statements.

3.4. Reflexivity and Researcher Position

In line with author's call for reflexive sociology (Himmlegaard, 2025) and Bourdieu's (2003) insistence that the analyst's standpoint must be included in the object, the researcher acknowledges their dual position: as a sociologist of knowledge engaged in theoretical abstraction and as an observer of institutional debates in the welfare sector. This positionality shapes what is perceived as salient, which theoretical traditions are foregrounded and how trauma is conceptualized.

Reflexivity is operationalized in two ways. Analytically, the study interrogates its own categories – "trauma," "crisis," "repair" – as part of the institutional discourse it examines. Ethically, it avoids using narratives as raw material for moral judgment of individual actors; instead, it seeks to understand how institutional structures and symbolic orders make certain harms more likely and certain justifications more plausible.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of institutional crises in the welfare sector, ethical caution is essential. While much of the corpus consists of publicly available documents, staff testimonies and internal materials are anonymized, and potentially identifying details are removed or generalized. The analysis focuses on patterns and mechanisms rather

than on particular individuals, in line with the commitment to structural rather than personalized explanation.

The study aligns with the European Sociological Association's (2022) Code of Ethics, emphasizing non-maleficence, respect for participants and care in handling sensitive narratives. Even when dealing with publicly known scandals, the objective is not to reproduce sensational details but to illuminate the underlying moral and epistemic dynamics.

3.6. Methodological Limitations

The interpretive and theoretically oriented nature of the study entails certain limitations. The corpus is selective and skewed toward institutions that have become visible through crisis; "silent" institutions without scandals are not represented. The narratives analyzed are mediated by multiple gatekeepers – journalists, inquiry commissions, organizational leaders – and are embedded in specific political and media environments. As such, they cannot be treated as transparent windows onto "what really happened."

However, these limitations are also strengths for the article's purposes. Because institutional trauma is defined here as a disturbance in meaning, justification and memory, the *textual traces* of crisis – reports, testimonies, public statements – are precisely where its effects become visible. The article therefore claims *theoretical transferability* rather than empirical representativeness: its conceptual model aims to illuminate mechanisms that can inform comparative research across welfare regimes.

4. Findings / Results

The analysis identifies three intertwined dimensions of institutional trauma as articulated in staff narratives, internal documents, and public representations: (1) moral collapse, (2) epistemic disorientation and (3) reconstructive rituals of repair. These are presented not as discrete stages but as overlapping processes.

4.1. Moral Collapse: The Disintegration of Institutional Legitimacy

Across the corpus, employees consistently depict the onset of crisis less as a technical failure and more as a *moral collapse*. The moment when media coverage intensifies, regulators intervene, or internal whistleblowing becomes public is experienced as a radical disjuncture between what the institution claimed to be and what it appears to have allowed.

One composite narrative describes the turning point in this way: *"It was the day we stopped believing our own story. The posters on the walls said 'dignity' and 'safety', but none of us could say those words without feeling sick."* Such statements suggest that what disintegrates is not only trust in particular leaders or procedures but confidence in the institution's *moral self-image*.

In Durkheimian terms, the collective representations that have sustained institutional legitimacy – figures of "the caring professional," "the safe ward," "the responsible management" – lose plausibility. The institution's moral field fragments: categories such as "care," "protection" and "necessary intervention" become objects of

suspicion and debate. Frontline staff report feeling that whatever they do might be interpreted as either negligent or abusive, depending on shifting external standards.

Building on Collins (2004), the analysis shows how this moral collapse is amplified through *negative interaction ritual chains*. Meetings that previously functioned as affirmations of shared purpose become arenas of mutual accusation or defensive silence. Everyday rituals – greetings in the corridor, informal debriefings after difficult shifts – are reported to "dry up." One caregiver notes: *"We stopped looking each other in the eye. Everyone was afraid that every sentence could end up in a report."* The erosion of ritual solidarity intensifies the sense that the institution has lost its moral center.

4.2. Epistemic Disorientation: When Professional Knowledge No Longer Orients Action

If moral collapse concerns the loss of legitimacy, *epistemic disorientation* concerns the loss of secure bearings for action. Staff describe situations in which established guidelines, protocols and professional routines no longer provide clear orientation. As one administrator puts it: *"We were following the book, and the book itself was on trial."*

From the perspective of the author's philosophical sociology (Himmlegaard, 2025), these experiences point to a breakdown in the *epistemic infrastructures* of welfare institutions – the socially sustained distinctions between "safe" and "unsafe," "appropriate" and "inappropriate," "best practice" and "violation." When these distinctions are destabilized, staff report not merely uncertainty but a deeper sense that the categories themselves have become unreliable.

Internal documents in the corpus often reveal diverging causal narratives. Some reports locate the crisis in individual failures – "poor documentation," "lack of competence" – while others highlight systemic issues: understaffing, conflicting mandates, contradictory regulations. This *ideological polyphony* (Mannheim, 1936) creates what one memo describes as "a fog of explanations" in which no single account can convincingly settle responsibility.

Epistemic disorientation also appears in the temporal dimension. Drawing on Tavory and Eliasoph (2013), one can say that crises disrupt the institution's ability to coordinate *protentions* (immediate expectations), *trajectories* (longer-term projects) and *temporal landscapes* (taken-for-granted assumptions about the future). When staff no longer trust that "doing the right thing" today will be recognized as such tomorrow, anticipatory coordination breaks down. Careers, reforms, and everyday decisions all become saturated with doubt.

This resonates with Sztompka's (2000) claim that trauma involves a shock to the cultural tissue of society. In the welfare institutions examined here, that tissue is composed of professional knowledge, regulatory frameworks, and moral narratives. Epistemic disorientation is thus not a mere cognitive confusion; it is a symptom of deeper structural contradictions within the institutional field.

4.3. Reconstructive Rituals: Repairing the Collective Order

Despite the depth of collapse and disorientation, the corpus also documents efforts at *symbolic repair*. Over time, institutions engage in what may be called *reconstructive*

rituals – organized practices aimed at restoring moral order, rebuilding trust, and re-establishing a shared frame of reference.

These rituals take multiple forms:

- **Public apologies and acknowledgements** by institutional leaders, often carefully scripted and mediated.
- **Internal reflection days**, where staff are invited to "process what happened," sometimes with external facilitators.
- **Commemorative practices**, such as moments of silence, dedicated rooms, or symbolic objects meant to mark "a new beginning."
- **Revisions of mission statements or value documents**, often accompanied by posters and communication campaigns.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, these practices can be seen as attempts to *reaccumulate symbolic capital* by demonstrating moral responsibility and responsiveness. Yet, as the author would insist (Himmlegaard, 2025), they are also *epistemic interventions*: they define which interpretations of the crisis become official, which are sidelined and what counts as "learning."

Staff testimonies reflect ambivalence toward these reconstructive rituals. Some describe them as meaningful turning points: *"For the first time, management said out loud that we had failed. It hurt, but it also felt honest."* Others experience them as hollow performances: *"We had a 'values day' with colorful post-its while nothing changed in the rota."* This divergence underscores Collins's (2004) insight that rituals generate emotional energy only when participants perceive them as authentic and consequential.

Reconstructive rituals also have a mnemonic function. They crystallize particular narratives about the crisis – "what went wrong," "what we have learned," "who we are now" – and inscribe them into institutional memory. In Olick and Robbins's (1998) terms, they are *mnemonic practices* that both close and keep open the meaning of the past. The institution does not simply "move on"; it creates official versions of its own trauma, with all the exclusions and tensions that such versions entail.

5. Discussion

5.1. Institutional Trauma as a Collective Condition

The analysis supports the view that what appears as "personal exhaustion" or "professional failure" among welfare workers often reflects a *collective condition*: the collapse of socially sustained meaning structures. In the author's terms (Himmlegaard, 2025), what breaks down in institutional trauma are the *collective representations* and *epistemic frameworks* that make professional action intelligible.

Durkheim's (1897/1951) concept of anomie helps articulate this. Staff descriptions of "not knowing what is right anymore" mirror a rupture in the moral bond between individuals and institutional norms. Yet, by emphasizing epistemic disorientation, the present article extends Durkheim's idea: the crisis is not only about weakened norms but also about destabilized *categories of judgment*. Institutional trauma thus emerges as a *total disturbance* – moral, cognitive, and emotional.

5.2. Knowledge, Power, and the Politics of Repair

The reconstructive rituals documented in the corpus reveal that trauma does not automatically lead to reflection or reform. Rather, it initiates *struggles over interpretation*. Bourdieu's vocabulary of fields and symbolic capital clarifies how different actors – managers, frontline staff, external experts – compete to define the "lessons learned" and to position themselves as responsible or redeemable.

Apologies, inquiries, and reform programs are thereby recast as forms of *epistemic governance*: they do not merely correct practical shortcomings but regulate which accounts of the past become authoritative. This aligns with Mannheim's (1936) insistence that knowledge claims are linked to social positions. Post-crisis narratives advanced by leadership may emphasize "isolated failures" and "unfortunate incidents," whereas staff narratives may foreground structural pressures and contradictory mandates. The politics of repair thus involves a politics of knowledge.

By integrating Sztompka's (2000) notion of cultural trauma, the article highlights how institutional trauma participates in broader societal debates about risk, vulnerability, and trust. Welfare institutions often function as moral barometers for the wider public; their crises resonate beyond organizational boundaries. The ways in which they narrate and manage trauma therefore have consequences for public understandings of care, responsibility, and the possibilities of systemic change.

5.3. Collective Memory, Anticipation and Reflexive Institutionalization

The findings also speak to the literature on collective memory. Following Halbwachs (1992), the article shows that institutional memory is not a neutral archive but a socially organized process. What is remembered from a crisis – and how – is shaped by organizational hierarchies, available narrative templates and external pressures.

Olick and Robbins's (1998) emphasis on mnemonic practices helps interpret reconstructive rituals as mechanisms that stabilize particular versions of the past. Public reports that frame a scandal as "a painful but necessary step toward modernization," for instance, do memory work: they transform trauma into a prelude to reform, potentially marginalizing alternative readings that might call for more radical change.

Tavory and Eliasoph's (2013) theorization of anticipation adds an important temporal dimension. Institutional trauma does not only reshape how the past is told; it also constrains who can plausibly speak about the future. Staff may, for example, become wary of long-term reform promises if previous "lessons learned" were not followed by substantial change. The coordination of futures – protentions, trajectories, temporal landscapes – thus becomes fragile, further entrenching epistemic tension within the institution.

The author's notion of *reflexive instability* (Himmlegaard, 2025) offers a way to synthesize these insights. Modern welfare institutions are structurally compelled to reflect upon their own moral foundations while operating under bureaucratic and political constraints that limit such reflection. Crises expose this tension. If institutions manage to transform trauma into a resource for deeper reflexivity, they may move toward more self-aware forms of governance. If not, trauma risks being absorbed into a repertoire of ritualized self-critique that leaves structural conditions unchanged.

5.4. Conceptual Contribution and Societal Implications

Conceptually, the article contributes to the sociology of knowledge and organizational studies in three main ways:

1. **It proposes a meso-level concept of institutional trauma** that bridges individual psychological accounts and macro-level theories of cultural trauma, emphasizing moral, epistemic, and mnemonic dimensions within welfare organizations.
2. **It elaborates the idea of epistemic rupture** as central to institutional crises, showing how professional categories and anticipations are destabilized and renegotiated through internal and public discourse.
3. **It connects institutional trauma to collective memory and anticipation**, arguing that how crises are remembered and projected into the future is crucial for understanding institutional resilience and change.

Societally, reframing welfare-sector crises as institutional traumas has several implications. It shifts attention from blaming individuals or isolated incidents toward examining how organizational structures, power relations and moral vocabularies make certain harms possible. It also suggests that sustainable reform cannot be achieved through procedural adjustments alone; it requires engaging with the deeper moral and epistemic orders that shape professional practice.

From a policy perspective, this implies that inquiries and reforms should be designed not only to establish responsibility and introduce safeguards but also to create spaces for meaningful reflexivity – where staff can articulate experiences of moral and epistemic disorientation without fear of reprisal, and where alternative narratives of care and responsibility can be explored.

6. Conclusion

This article has developed a theoretical framework for understanding *institutional trauma* in the welfare sector as a collective rupture in moral, epistemic, and mnemonic orders. Drawing on the author's philosophical sociology (Himmlegaard, 2025), supplemented by Durkheim, Mannheim, Bourdieu, Collins, Sztompka and the literature on social memory and anticipation, it has argued that organizational crises do more than damage reputations: they unsettle the symbolic infrastructures that make welfare institutions recognizable as sites of care and protection.

The analysis of staff testimonies, internal documents and public representations has illustrated three interwoven dimensions of institutional trauma: moral collapse, epistemic disorientation, and reconstructive rituals of repair. These processes reveal that institutions "know" and "remember" through socially organized practices, and that their efforts to heal themselves are inseparable from struggles over interpretation, legitimacy, and future direction.

Theoretically, the article positions institutional trauma as a key object for the sociology of knowledge, inviting further research into how epistemic orders are constructed, disrupted, and reconfigured in organizational contexts. Empirically, future studies could pursue comparative designs across welfare regimes, examine the

role of digital media in shaping institutional memory, or explore how service users' perspectives intersect with staff narratives in the co-production of trauma and repair.

Ultimately, the concept of institutional trauma reminds us that welfare institutions – created to respond to human vulnerability – are themselves vulnerable moral fields. Their capacity to care for others depends, in part, on their ability to confront and learn from their own ruptures without closing them too quickly through premature narratives of resolution.

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МІХАЕЛЬ ГІМЛЕҐАРД

Інституційна травма та колективна пам'ять у сфері соціального добробуту: філософсько-соціологічний аналіз морального порядку та епістемічного розриву

У статті розробляються теоретичні основи для розуміння того, як організаційні кризи та публічні скандали у сфері соціального добробуту породжують інституційну травму та формують колективну пам'ять працівників. Спираючись на концептуальні положення авторської філософської соціології, дослідження розглядає установи соціального захисту як соціальні поля, структуровані моральними ієрархіями, символічним капіталом та історично вкоріненими епістемічними зразками. Інституційна травма тлумачиться не лише як психологічний наслідок кризи, а й як соціально опосередковане порушення спільних смислів і професійної ідентичності.

Теоретична модель поєднує авторську філософську соціологію з теорією полів П'єра Бурдьє та концепцією ритуальних ланцюжків взаємодії Рендала Колінза, пов'язуючи виробництво колективної пам'яті з відтворенням інституційної влади.

Емпірично стаття ґрунтується на якісному інтерпретативному аналізі наративів і рефлексійних документів з установ соціального добробуту, що зазнали моральних або адміністративних криз. Крізь призму філософської соціології показано, що колективна ідентичність у цих інституціях підтримується моральним дискурсом, ритуалізованою комунікацією та спільним відчуттям символічного порядку. Коли цей порядок руйнується, працівники переживають не лише професійну дезорієнтацію, а й глибокий епістемічний розрив — «кризу смислу», яка перегукується з дюркгаймівським поняттям аномії.

У статті зроблено висновок, що розуміння інституційної травми потребує соціологічного пояснення того, як колективна пам'ять організується, легітимується та переглядається в межах моральних полів інституцій соціального добробуту. Переосмислення травми як реляційного та епістемічного феномену робить внесок у розвиток соціології знання про інституції та моральний досвід.

Ключові слова: *інституційна травма; колективна пам'ять; сфера соціального добробуту; організаційна культура; філософська соціологія; Бурдьє; Колінз; Штомпка*

MICHAEL HIMMLEGAARD

Institutional trauma and collective memory in the welfare sector: a philosophical-sociological analysis of moral order and epistemic rupture

This article develops a theoretical framework for understanding how organizational crises and public scandals in the welfare sector generate institutional trauma and reorganize collective memory among employees. Drawing upon the author's philosophical sociology, the analysis conceptualizes welfare institutions not as neutral bureaucracies, but as moral fields structured by symbolic hierarchies, socially

sustained epistemic orders and historically sedimented categories of moral judgment. Institutional trauma is understood not as an aggregation of individual psychological injuries but as a socially mediated epistemic rupture – a breakdown in the taken-for-granted frameworks that make professional action intelligible and morally justified.

The article proposes a multidimensional theoretical synthesis combining Durkheim's account of collective representations and anomie, Mannheim's conception of socially situated knowledge, Bourdieu's field theory and Collins's model of interaction ritual chains, supplemented by insights from the sociology of cultural trauma (Sztompka, 2000) and social memory studies (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick & Robbins, 1998). Conceptually, it argues that crises in welfare institutions disrupt three interwoven orders: (1) the moral order regulating expectations of care and responsibility, (2) the epistemic order that defines what counts as valid professional knowledge, and (3) the mnemonic order through which institutions remember and narrate their past.

Empirically oriented illustrations are drawn from a purposively selected corpus of staff testimonies, internal documents, and public representations from documented crises in European welfare institutions. These materials are treated not as a representative sample but as analytically constructed narratives that illuminate recurring patterns of moral breakdown, epistemic disorientation, and reconstructive rituals of repair. The article concludes that institutional trauma is best understood as a collective condition in which moral, cognitive and mnemonic orders are simultaneously shaken, and that welfare institutions "heal" themselves – if at all – by reshaping their symbolic boundaries and mnemonic practices rather than simply by implementing new procedures.

Keywords: *institutional trauma; collective memory; welfare sector; organizational culture; philosophical sociology; Bourdieu; Collins; Sztompka*