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Some initial thoughts and a work in progress.

I understand governance as the fragmented relationships and technologies of power that shape society and ultimately shape the subjectivity of individuals.

Following a Foucault, informed by his later genealogical approach that stresses contingency and contestability (Bevir’s ‘historicist’ as opposed to ‘structuralist’ account) I see governance as mutable and changing as a result of the situated agency of individuals, operating within and through discourses. This mutable, contestible account of governance is ‘governmentality.’

Discourses operate in an emergent social, political and ecological terrain, and as such there is always the potential for ‘dilemma’ or ‘disconcertment,’ and there are always other agendas that come into play, such that any particular discourse, at any particular time, is constantly being (re)made – that is, restablished against competing accounts, or modified because of those accounts. Similarly, technologies of power and power/knowledge capacities emerge and change.

In accounting for neo-liberal governance as neo-liberal governmentality, we are accounting for the contingencies and contestations that produce a particular assemblage of governance practices, at a particular time, but with an awareness that that particularity, through its contingency, in inherently fragile and must be constantly re-made or evolved if it is to continue.

It is at these points of contingency that critique of governance has its greatest power to disrupt, emancipate or control. Systems approaches that seek to stablise a system might seek to reinforce these contingent connections/relationships. Approaches that seek to destabilize will seek to undermine and pull them apart. An ethical approach to governmentality analysis - because it cannot justify any action on an ultimate truth – can only highlight contingency, which at once recognizes the non-necessity of a particular truth or way of being, but also recognizes it as an adopted practice with a history… and that no other truth is necessarily more valid…

It is at this moment of awareness of contingency that individual agency can be de-situated to a greater extent, giving greater freedom of movement to chose to be otherwise. This is the transformative potential that governmentality as a critique of governance enables at the individual and collective level. I am interested in practices and methodologies that help bring about this moment.

How the hell does heat stress relate to this?

The critique of how heat stress is managed at present is informed by the ontological and epistemic approaches in governmentality. Its sees knowledge as contingent, constantly (re)enacted, and susceptible to change, crisis, dilemma and disconcertment. There is something particularly powerful about the way that bodily experience might act as an alternative way of knowing that might come into tension with received discourses.

My central questions are: Where does individual knowledge about what heat stress is and how to manage it come from? How is that knowledge (re)established in the workplace – i.e. confirmed or challenged? Were there any moments of dilemma/disconcertment where beliefs were profoundly out-of-whack with experiences? Did this engender transformative change? Or was the response to maintain the belief by fleeing or denial?

At the heart of this is an interest in whether dilemma is transformative or traumatic – does it open up capacity to be otherwise, or does it shut it down? This connects to another ethical concern of the governmentality as the account of governance and being – the sensitivity to violence.

The tropes of neoliberalism and resilience assume we have infinite capacity to emerge. They rarely account for the violence and destructiveness of transformation as we shift from one form of life to an incommensurable other. So we need to pay attention to where change comes from and how it emerges: is it the relatively de-situated agency of individuals, or is it change that is conducted, enabled, enforced or ‘encouraged’ in us by others?

The moment of transformation and its attendant relationships of power will shape whether we are able to emerge and survive or shut down and collapse. There is a degree of violence at both ends of this spectrum, but the quality of that violence is different, and has profound implications for the result.