

Nigam, A., Compagni, A. & Cappellaro, G. Knowledge voids and failure of professional inference: How responding to an extreme knowledge disturbance through relational-affective competence leads to reimagine a profession's foundations

#### Abstract

Drawing on an in-depth study of physicians facing the first Covid-19 outbreak in Italy in 2020, we advance theory on how professionals experience and respond to knowledge disturbances in their workplace. We show that in the context of an extreme knowledge void and of failure of normal inferential processes, professionals develop a new relational-affective competence that allows them to muddle through and, ultimately, to reflect upon and reimagine the foundations of their profession. In the process leading to this final outcome, we detail the interplay between professionals' emotional dynamics and situated practices, showing how practices allow to transform negative emotional experiences into positive ones and how these, in turn, make professionals progress in their transformative reflective efforts. Our study contributes to the literature on professions by theorizing the micro-level origins of the changes and evolution of professions and, in this, the role of relational and affective mechanisms vis-à-vis prevailing accounts of cognitive expansion. With our work, we also open up new avenues in the study of expert responses in emergency contexts.