

The Evolution of Basic Assumptions In Twenty-first Century Organizationsⁱ

ABSTRACT

Systems psychodynamics provides an invaluable perspective for understanding large scale social, economic and cultural change. This paper considers the evolution of organizational life since World War II from the perspective of overriding Basic Assumptions, in Bion's terms. Finally, the challenges facing organizations in the twenty-first century are discussed, especially the search for hope that is both mature and located firmly within the depressive position.

Keywords: Systems, Psychodynamics, Fundamentalism, Basic Assumption One-ness

While there is widespread consensus that the current economic crisis is not a typical recessionary cycle, but rather something much deeper, the nature of the transformation underway is subject to much speculation. A great deal of the economic expansion over the last decade, fueled by extensive leverage and indebtedness, has proven illusory. Now exposed as untenable is the dependence on inexhaustible consumer spending to invigorate economic growth over long periods of time. The troubling profile of many organizations that have fostered and perpetuated the social, cultural and economic arrangements leading to this collapse have been discussed widely, most systematically in Susan Long's discussion of the perverse organization (2008).

The hypothesis that the seemingly endless consumption serves psychic as well as economic functions leads to the question of how the underlying anxieties that are being managed in this fashion will be manifested. There appear to be many large-scale movements underway that signal an evolution of the organizing economic principles that govern political and economic activity. In addition to the need to rebuild a more rational engine of economic growth, numerous profound issues are coming to the fore, including: the global interdependence that underlies climate issues; declining relative power of United States; evolution of information technology from being a tool to becoming the environment of work; changes in the geo-politics of carbon-based industrial production as alternative energy sources are developed; and the challenge asymmetric warfare, including terrorism, as the container of major ideological conflict.

In this paper I wish to consider the relevance of systems psychodynamics as a lens for understanding aspects of major change. My intention is three-fold. First, to review the broad arc

of social, cultural, and economic change since World War II in a historical context that relates to Bion's (1959) concept of Basic Assumption Life. Second, to reflect on the reemergence of fundamentalism and, specifically, the fundamentalist state of mind in organizational life. Finally, I will consider the implications of emerging events in relation to the systems psychodynamic framework, focusing on the challenge of fostering mature hope and development in today's organizations.

My starting point is an article written by Eric Miller & Olya Khaleelee (1985) entitled *Beyond the Small Group: society as an intelligible field of study* which provided a framework for understanding the changing organizational world in Bion's basic assumption terms. By showing how the overtones of basic assumption life seem unmistakably active in large scale social processes they provided a new focus for understanding how organizations and institutions within society are understood and how unconscious dynamics shape social policy.

The story that their argument crystallized for me goes like this: From the end of World War II to somewhere around the mid-1980's, Basic Assumption Dependency (BaD) was the overriding group culture.ⁱⁱ Propelled by post-war reparative impulses in an environment of economic surplus and relatively stable environments, organizations and institutions oriented themselves around the dependency needs of their members.

Many social and organizational arrangements expressed the tenor of BaD. Vast programs were created to protect the wellbeing of citizens across the economic spectrum. Union-management relations stabilized into mutually beneficial interdependence. Linear career paths created a foundation for the long-term exchange of personal security for commitment to organizational purposes. Rising wealth provided the means to address wide ranging dependency needs.

The regressive qualities of BaD were manifested in the complacency and indifference that was fostered by these conditions. Of particular concern was how it encouraged people to relinquish their own authority and even their own capacity to think. (Miller, 1993) Though infantilizing, even emotionally disabling at worst, the adaptive aspects of the BaD orientation often furthered human development through the many caring institutions that the environment supported. Many of our most enduring social support programs came from this era, including our programs supporting medical care and retirement.

However, around the early 1980's this arrangement started coming apart, then imploded

altogether as we moved into the post-industrial world of globalization, knowledge work, and brutally competitive environments. The aura of BaD receded, replaced by one of Basic Assumption Fight/Flight (BaFF). Many arrangements that had been developed within the dependency framework were poorly suited to the global, post-industrial economy. Cumbersome, calcified industrial enterprises were unable to compete. Patterns of labor relations established in the dependency oriented era were out of step with the new world, further rendering our companies uncompetitive. While many of the care-taking functions built into our institutions were noble, they were also the source of inefficiency.

As the dependency framework crumbled, a newly emerging BaFF culture shaped a much harsher and colder world. Security, as a value, was replaced by performance and competitiveness. Markets came to be idealized as the only reliable organizing principle in spite of the devastating impact of exposing human, social service and educational institutions to market forces. Society's wounded often came to be seen as society's parasites.

Many of the once dominant industrial enterprises were outsmarted, out produced and out maneuvered. The BaFF environment provided an emotional context for wrenching decisions and changes that were required to reverse the decline and allay the associated anxieties. As an adaptive force, the aura of BaFF provided an emotional basis for effective, highly focused actions that were mobilized to support economic transformation. The monumental indifference of markets to human need, on the other hand, also contains its regressive side: these achievements came with immense damage, as whatever stood in the way was devalued and often discarded. Vast swathes of our social fabric disintegrated, producing wrenching dislocation and displacement.

I believe we have largely completed the task that BaFF was mobilized to accomplish, and that the current recession represents the final phase of this transformation. Many formerly rigid corporations are now enormously efficient, lean and in disciplined cycles of rigorous self improvement. Residual aspects of the dependency environment have been, to a large degree, wrung out of the system. The last major remnants of security based employment arrangements are coming under tremendous pressure and will soon collapse. Corporations are shedding costly pension and health care obligations through legal and financial maneuvers, leaving older workers exposed and vulnerable and younger workers facing far more uncertain futures.

A new overriding Basic Assumption

One central proposition of this article is that we are in the midst of yet another shift in overarching Basic Assumption life, a shift geared to new anxieties and new challenges. Thirty years of social, economic, industrial and technological upheaval, guided by the emotional compass of BaFF, have left behind a fragmented, shocked, society with people searching for connection, hope and lost meaning. Symbol systems of family, social and political authority, sexuality, birth, death, and the ordering of the life cycle are all in disarray. Repeated betrayal by organizations, failed dependency, massive social trauma and fragmentation of the self have stimulated a deep yearning for renewal in the midst of a catastrophic loss of reliable, containing structures.

I am proposing that the search for new meaning and connection is propelling the emergence of a new emotional context of Basic Assumption life that is finding expression through resurgence of religious hopefulness, one that resembles what Turquet (1974) described as Basic Assumption Oneness (BaO). In this Basic Assumption state -- a fourth added to Bion's original three -- members "seek to join in a powerful union with an omnipotent force, unobtainably high, to surrender self for passive participation, and thereby to feel existence, well-being, and wholeness" (p. 375). This basic assumption -- that of 'oneness' -- signifies a further stage of regression beyond dependency, back to questions of existence itself, which are defended against with oceanic feelings of unity,

BaO is emerging as an underlying emotional calculus to allay profound anxieties centered on catastrophic experiences of dissolution and dislocation, both of the self and of the social context within which the self is located. In contrast, Basic Assumption Dependency (BaD) is organized around protection and relief: "to be sustained by a leader on whom it depends for nourishment, material and spiritual, and protection" (Bion, 1959) regardless of whether the leader is a person, a book or set of ideas and beliefs that operate as a bible. This manifestation of BaO differs significantly from the BaD society that was organized around nurturance, protection, care and security and certainly from the Basic Assumption Fight/Flight (BaFF) that ushered in the transformation to post-industrial society. What is emerging now closely resembles the overt religious themes that Bion suggests underlies Basic Assumption life since BaO is ultimately about hope -- hope for relief and transcendence.

Bion identified modal institutions that most closely embody the myths embedded in

each of the Basic Assumption states - the Church or hospital for BaD, the Army for BaFF, and the Aristocracy for Basic Assumption Pairing (BaP). My hypothesis is that Fundamentalism functions in such a fashion for BaO. As a distillation of the emotional tone of the unconscious fantasies expressed through the Basic Assumption state, fundamentalism provides an avenue for management of core anxieties centering on dissolution and fragmentation on behalf of the wider society. While fundamentalism may be the regressive face of BaO, its adaptive expression might be found in the environmental movement, which is responding to a crisis that emphasizes global interdependence and is amenable only to coherent global action.

Hope in a fragmented world

Evangelism, from the Greek for “bringer of good news,” refers to preaching the Christian Gospel and to converting non-believers. Its doctrine sees the Bible as the only avenue for answering questions, rejecting tradition as a source of meaning. As God’s revealed word, the Bible is without error. Yet in spite of our common stereotypes, inklings of the depressive position in Evangelical thinking can be seen in the view that, while the Bible does not err, it must be interpreted. As a result there is room for meaning through interaction, albeit in a highly limited fashion since influence is meant to go only in one direction. Yet it is a strategy of joining, based on the idea of spreading God’s truth through personal encounters, in relationships, and at work.

Fundamentalism is more challenging, with its embattled, persecutory alienation from the surrounding culture. Pursuing separateness, fundamentalists create religious enclaves, protectively shielded from the environment, employing calcified projective dynamics to maintain the fantasy that God will reward the righteous within and punish the sinners outside. Freed from the burden of reason by totalizing explanation, it buffers followers from the injuries of experience and creates prohibition to thought. In keeping with the self-sealing features of Basic Assumption life, there is little desire to learn since new ideas threaten internal harmony.

The sacred text relocates the center that seemed to have been lost in the fragmentation and disarray of contemporary society, making it possible to know again and judge with confidence. Its implicit critique of the modernist’s secular humanism echoes Yeat’s famous poem about the anxiety and dark emptiness in modern society: “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold: “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” The anarchy, the families torn by

violence or collapse, moral decay, cities plagued by crime, burgeoning terrorism and global holocaust reflect, from the fundamentalist perspective, the effects of rejecting the absolute dictates of an infinite god. Ultimately, evangelism and fundamentalism are based on hope, offering avenues to meaning and renewal.

In many respects the social and psychological implications of the search for a reliable, absolute center become every bit as devastating as the disintegrative consequences of modernism against which fundamentalism is reacting. With its orientation toward splitting – love and hate, good and evil, the righteous and the sinners – fundamentalism’s paranoid-schizoid underpinnings often produce frightening realities. It is a strategy of withdrawal and dis-identification, rejecting the surrounding society as hopelessly corrupt. Built upon the idea that the sacred dimensions of self and community are destroyed by satanic forces in the form of pluralism, secular humanism, and modern culture, it is a pursuit of separation.

Fundamentalism is also distinguished by an apocalyptic vision, which can be propelled by mythic images of destruction and renewal. In many instances its adherents mistrust incremental progress but rather foresee the ultimate collapse of the profane world. In the extreme, mass destruction becomes the facilitator of apocalyptic renewal, as evidenced in the intent behind 9/11 and numerous mass killings, and in dreams of a nuclear holocaust ushering in the ultimate “end of days” fulfillment. Yearning for such ultimate merger with the purified whole is the hallmark of BaO. Fundamentalism offers a powerful counterpoint to the terrifying and disorienting world, a potent hope that the degradation and chaos will be transformed into purity and clarity.

Gordon Lawrence (1997) foreshadowed this analysis with his work on totalitarian states of mind, arguing that in response to rapid change and instability people produced certainty by projecting omnipotence into their leaders, who then responded by creating conditions that are totalitarian in character. However, where the authoritarian mind fosters thoughtless obedience to established social and institutional structures, the fundamentalist mind rejects them as profane and turns instead directly to “revealed truth”, bypassing authority structures. While both states of mind constrict thought and can produce oppressive social order, they are distinguished by the social context within which they exist. Authoritarianism is a derivative of modernism and modern society, with its emphasis on character and super-ego (Adorno, 1969). Fundamentalism, in contrast, is related to the fragmentation both of the self and the social context.

Common to all totalizing frameworks is an attack on negotiated meaning and interpretation. Since the fundamentalist's orthodoxy is given and invariant, the corresponding concrete states of mind necessitate the eradication of spaces where creativity and discovery flourish. From this standpoint fundamentalism can be understood as a protest against interpretation, and a rejection of the necessity of having to make sense for oneself of spiritual and moral matters.

Winnicott's (1951) notion of potential space provides a way of situating the act of interpretation in a social and organizational context. As an intermediate area of experiencing that lies between fantasy and reality, "It is in the space between inner and outer world, which is also the space between people -- the potential space -- that intimate relationships and creativity occur" (p. 173). It is where the comingling of subjective and objective can produce creativity and development and where mature hope can be entertained.

Because potential space is a realm of uncertainty, meaning can be discovered, people can find development and connection to the world rather than retreat from it. While it is a place of freedom it can also be a realm of terrifying indeterminacy. The "new idea" is anathema to fundamentalist thinking. Just as fundamentalism can be seen as a protest against interpretation, it can be considered *as* the absence of potential space. On the individual level, the death of potential space is a psychic disaster because reality and fantasy become indistinguishable, delusional systems are impenetrably sealed-off from experience and novelty becomes impossible (Sumner, 2005).

Similarly, Erikson suggested that when people despair of an essential wholeness they take refuge in totalism. How fundamentalist convictions may represent attempts to heal traumatized, fractured selves has been explored by many authors and psychoanalysts (i.e. Strozier 2002). Large segments of our population, overwhelmed by anxiety, abandonment and loss, despairing of a missing center, are asking God to bring order to internal disarray.

At a global level, religious fundamentalism has returned on a scale that seemed unimaginable not long ago. Yet, what is most salient to this discussion is not the *fact* of fundamentalism but the role it plays at this point in history and how the mentality influences the cultural mainstream. What Boyer (1994), referring to fundamentalism, calls the "dominion of prophecy" has existed throughout U.S. history as a fringe culture which periodically moves to a more central position during periods of upheaval and dislocation. He describes how each phase

of fundamentalist centrality was characterized by preoccupation with the loss of identity due to a newly emergent modern context. We are living in such a time.

The impact of fundamentalist thinking

Elements of fundamentalist thinking that have found their way into the mainstream – the more central position discussed by Boyer – are not difficult to find. One vivid and now famous illustration is that of George W. Bush, who reported that after the 9/11 bombings a divine message was revealed to him - that his mission was to protect the west against extremist Muslims (Wills, 2003). What is noteworthy here is his mode of apprehending the mission, a way of knowing that precludes rational discourse. Similar religious themes occurred throughout the entire Bush administration in both domestic and foreign policy. Increasingly politics has focused on “wedge” and cultural issues that appeal by painting those who hold different viewpoints as alien and threatening. The paranoid isolationist strains in fundamentalist thinking shaped our approach to foreign relations throughout the Bush era, an approach in which engagement became equated with appeasement and diplomacy with retreat.

Before turning to organizational settings, I would like to point out two strains of thought that have gained mainstream support in the U.S. which exemplify the fundamentalist attitude and its insistence on revealed truth. One is the resurgence of creationism and efforts to replace the teaching of evolutionary theory in the schools. In several regions there is a public struggle, led by powerful, well organized forces, over the teaching of evolution and whether revealed biblical truths will be taught alongside it as a viable alternative in the form of an approach called “Intelligent Design.” This theory claims that living organisms are too complex – “irreducible complexity” – to be explained by anything other than an intelligent force. Advocates of intelligent design have made, and continue to make, inroads into education policies – also with the support of ex-President Bush.

A second, similar thrust can be found in the judicial debates about the place of interpretive meaning. A central struggle that divides the Supreme Court is what philosophy of understanding should govern the application of our Constitution. Gaining strength in the U.S. justice system, and now favored by several of our Supreme Court justices, is the theory of Originalism which takes the literal position that the Constitution has a fixed and knowable meaning that should be strictly followed, the specific meanings intended by the “founding

fathers.” The idea of an evolving meaning, or one that grows out of interpretive meaning, is strictly forbidden.

Similar styles of thought, perhaps more obscured, can be seen in more ordinary, and organizational, contexts. Take, for example, the shadow of revealed truth that can be seen in the idealization of management gurus, in the endlessly repeated clichés that pervade many organizational settings, and in the thoughtless epithets that form a taken-for-granted reality. Prohibitions to thought can be seen in the numbing, abstract language that closes off the development of interpretive meaning or nuanced conversation in many corporate environments. So does the reductionism of stock, mission statements and, likely, the tendency to ritualistically adopt such formulaic statements proclaiming the desire to be the world’s premier (fill in the blank). Often accompanying the cultural homogenization and scripted language is rigid prohibition against reflection on experience and the corresponding defenses against engaging it. Instead, a kind of prescriptive approach to human interrelations becomes codified by human resources departments, built into a range of training and socialization methods.

If fundamentalism provides one direction for hope, albeit often primitive and regressive, what about alternative directions for hope, to echo the title of a seminal paper by Eric Trist (1997). Where is hope that functions more at the level of the depressive position in contrast to the paranoid-schizoid hopes generated by the fundamentalist enterprise? About this question I believe the systems psychodynamic tradition has useful ideas to contribute.

Basic Assumption life can support either regressive or developmental adaptation, as discussed above. In counterpoint to the emergence of fundamentalist expression of BaO, more adaptive manifestations can be found in the support and recognition of major global challenges that bind us together. The sense of unity and communal feelings engendered by BaO supports efforts to address many critical issues such as recognition of the tightly integrated interdependence that is emerging through the global economy. The increasingly dense interconnectedness that characterizes so much of contemporary life lends itself to problem-solving approaches that supersede the conventional pattern of national and interest group politics, which in turn are supported by the emotional climate evoked by BaO. Without some sort of emotional connection to a sense of unity it is difficult to imagine addressing critical challenges that are emerging on a global scale, such as those of climate change.

How the election of Barack Obama reflects these dynamics remains to be seen.

Certainly the progressive ideals of community, global responsibility and post-divisive politics express the adaptive features of BaO. It may be worth noting that he, too, expresses strong religiosity. However, the foreboding tendencies toward idealization and messianic adoration may foreshadow a problematic aspect of the election as well. With either potential trajectory, the elements of BaO that are driven by hopes of salvation through unification and oceanic resolution of distress are clearly evidenced by the remarkable global catharsis that occurred with the election.

The task-sentient boundary as potential space

Opportunities for development can be found where interpretation and negotiated meaning are able to thrive. The system psychodynamic tradition has identified one such space in its basic theoretical foundations – that of the boundary between the task and sentient systems. Early research at the Tavistock Institute recognized that work organizations can only be understood through a binocular focus on two major subsystems, what Trist and his group called the “social” and technical,” subsystems (1967) and what Miller & Rice (1967) described as “sentient” and “task”.

Each subsystem – one organized around the formal, rational elements of productive enterprise and the other around the socio-psychological realities of people – operate according to fundamentally different types of logic, creating distinctly different dynamics. Any full understanding of organizational activity requires appreciating the deep and profound interdependence between the two. Since maximizing one at the expense of the other is a recipe for dysfunction or failure, optimizing the relationship between them becomes a focal concern. To illustrate, the early coal projects, under the leadership of Eric Trist (1963), discovered how the design of a new method of extraction, that was failing to produce the expected productivity gains, was oblivious to the social system, having been designed through a lens of pure technical criteria. A new approach to configuring the boundary between the social and technical systems returned human considerations to the configuration of technology and in doing so re-vitalized the operation.

What the focus on this intersection rendered visible became particularly important in relation to the economic transformation of the last sixty years. Work has increasingly required greater knowledge, judgment, specialization, and collaboration while at the same time

organizations have become increasingly unstable and complex. At a general level, mobilizing human commitment and creativity in relation to organizations that no longer provide security has become a central concern. Alternatively framed, how this space, where the human dimension and the formal organization intersect, generates either vital engagement or deadened sterility becomes a question of vital concern.

Numerous studies and projects have addressed how various organizational configurations, in both technical and social terms, determine whether this place of intersection is rich with integrative human engagement and developmental possibilities or deadening and concretizing. Deadening and sterile arrangements foster and support the use of primitive defensives, and tend to elicit organizational cultures that exhibit the qualities of fundamentalist thinking. Alternatively, where the intersection of task and sentience creates the medium for human meaning at work people can bring their developmental dramas as a vehicle for emotional growth and reparative re-integration (Klein, 1952; Hirschhorn, 1988). And it is a source of creativity, where passion and imagination merge with the demands of reality in productive problem solving.

Shapiro and Carr (1991) extended our appreciation of the importance of this boundary by illustrating that it also provides an interpretative ground for comprehending and connecting with the larger social order. Making sense of the world through our experiences in role enables us to decode experience in relation to the larger social, economic and political context. Institutional roles and structures play an increasingly vital part in establishing meaningful connection to a world where traditional meanings are lost and fixed reference points no longer provide ready containment.

The reparative and developmental potential of work is active when this is space where people can bring the inner resources and meanings into vital interaction with the tasks and technologies employed by the organization. This contrasts with the dominant thinking in the early era of mechanization, where workers were regarded as replaceable, unthinking, impersonal machine parts. A more contemporary metaphor for deadening environments are those in which people are treated as something akin to lines of programmed code, to be deployed as part of a larger programmed effort, where human resources departments are called in when a bug is detected (Gould and Krantz, unpublished). Interrelations of task and sentience that provide for possibilities of being and thinking bring people into connection with the world rather than

producing the retreat from it that characterizes the fundamentalist mentality.

The original exploration of this space where humanity and subjectivity interweave with the formal stemmed from efforts to make sense of new forms of work organization that were emerging after World War II. Since then this lens has been applied to new and emergent forms of work organization as the social and economic arrangements have transformed. Through making sense of new patterns of organization they discovered powerful ways to make work a place of learning and growth that supported performance and efficiency at the same time. While our context is so vastly different, the challenge is similar – fostering effective forms of work and social organization that promote psychological integration and development.

Animating the task-sentient boundary necessitates turning our attention to the new evolving organizations and new social, technological and economic arrangements, embracing them, and maybe even learning how to love them. Endless opportunities exist for contribution to the development of new methods of work and collaboration. Yet joining with today's global, knowledge-intensive, post-modern organizations from the systems psychodynamic perspective also requires us to relinquish the sentimental attachment to earlier forms of organization.

Conclusion

This effort to find a common thread connecting large economic cycles, fundamentalism and the search of mature hope at the boundary of task and sentient systems arises from an effort to explore emerging social, psychological and organizational realities. The lenses of Basic Assumption life, potential space, and socio-technical systems thinking – all important elements of the systems psychodynamic framework – provide important and useful perspectives on these issues. My hope is that in relation to the 21st century challenges the systems psychodynamic framework provides as an enormously rich vein of thought and exploration, one that continues to hold great promise as a source of learning and creativity, and one that can strengthen our depressive position responses to the longing for hope in today's world.

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ⁱ This chapter is based on the Eric J. Miller Memorial lecture, given in March, 2006 and reprinted in the *Journal of Organisational and Social Dynamics* vol. 6, no 2, 2006. pp. 258-272

ⁱⁱ I am mindful that my orientation is decidedly a U.S. perspective. At the same time, there appear to be commonalities to the range of fundamentalisms, many which have been ascendant within their own cultures in recent years.