

Forward to: *The Unconscious at Work*

A. Obholzer & V. Roberts (eds.)

London: Routledge, 1994

Writing this introduction offered me an opportunity to remember my own experiences in the 'Consulting to Institutions Workshop' that served as a kind of incubator for the ideas developed in these chapters. That was over ten years ago, and although only one of the authors represented in this volume was in the Workshop at that time, the same spirit of integrity, forthrightness, and compassion that touched me so then has clearly remained in force since, if these papers can be taken as an indication

The central themes of these articles concern the capacity of human service professionals to confront the powerful and primitive emotional states that underlie helping relationships (especially with people in dire need), and consider how the staff members of these organizations can function effectively without becoming chaotic or withdrawn. Another is how the organizational arrangements themselves - the structures, cultures, modes of operation, etc. - can help or hinder in protecting this precious capacity.

To explore the complex interplay of person and setting the authors employ a frame of reference pioneered at Tavistock that strives to integrate systems thinking with psychoanalysis. Its focus renders the impact of individually experienced anxiety, guilt and doubt visible in the collective life and work of human service organizations. It also illustrates how different levels of caring systems -- from the individual through the primary work group, to the whole organization and the wider environment -- interpenetrate, and how dynamics at one level can affect and be mirrored at other levels. They offer an enormously rich and enriching approach to understanding the powerful forces that suffuse human service organizations. I am confident that these reflections will be valuable for any managers, practitioners or students of human service organizations willing to grapple with these ideas.

I say grapple for two reasons. One is that the authors have not watered down the ideas so as to make them effortlessly accessible or superficial. They are complicated ideas about complicated realities, and while the chapters are direct and understandable, they are far from simplistic. Another reason they require "grappling" is the fullness and openness with which the authors confront the pain and despair that often permeates human service work, and that is often avoided at the cost of diminished effectiveness.

The insights in these articles were not earned painlessly. I was impressed and, at times, humbled by the extent to which the authors made themselves vulnerable to the most primitive and disturbing aspects of the institutions they were attempting to understand and help. It is through the medium of these challenging personal experiences that the authors were often able to make sense of the dynamics that engendered symptoms of organizational dysfunction, conflict and alienation in the institutions they were attempting to assist. In reading these chapters one confronts, at arms length, the great emotional impact of working closely with these organizations.