

Sources of Hope in Contemporary Organizations
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Abstract: One place hope can be found is in the space where individuals come into intimate contact with their organizations – the role, where engagement is shaped by creativity, meaningful work and generative relationships. The systems psychodynamic tradition has explored ways in which this type of functioning, in the depressive position, can be supported and fostered by various aspects of the organization. The “social defense systems” that can serve this purpose in newly emerging contemporary organizations are not well understood; the outlines of them are now only beginning to emerge. For systems psychodynamic thinking to keep pace of these changes, it must revise and refine many of its basic concepts so that they are pertinent to the new forms of organizational life, forms that are characterized by networked relationships, relationships mediated by technology, and knowledge-based work.

Introduction

Working in the systems psychodynamic tradition, from a Kleinian standpoint, requires attending to the expression of paranoid-schizoid and depressive dynamics in social and organizational life. Just as individual development is informed by the on-going, reciprocal, oscillating, tension between these two positions, so too with their correlates in social phenomena. In so many ways the world seems to be careening out of control, governed by the enactment of primitive fantasies and part-object relations. We are addicted to the same fossil fuels that will destroy the essential container within which we live. The exercise of primitive object relations by those in power has gained immense and untold amplification with technology. As unfettered capitalism sweeps over the landscape, practically nothing or no one seems to escape the objectifying impact of the monetization of everything. Yet we can also see evidence of the depressive mode in the emergent environmental movement, where responsibility for our own destructiveness is acknowledged and in powerful social and political movements that are calling such destructive tendencies into question.

Today the more primitive forces often appear to have the upper hand. Harold Bridger (private communication) was fond of pointing out that the world was coming to increasingly resemble the unconscious itself, with its emergent unpredictability, bizarre eruptions of irrational dynamics and the seemingly illogical linkages between events across space and time. It certainly

does seem, at times, that the paranoid-schizoid mode of thought and interaction is coming to dominate the scene more and more. The rapid and profound losses attending massive dislocation associated with increasing rates of social, economic and technological change, globalization, hyper-turbulent environments, and loss of familiar moral orders are stimulating an often regressive search for hope and order. With the splitting that underlies fundamentalisms of all sorts, terrorism and warfare have now become a constant feature of the 21st century.

Organizational analysis in the systems psychodynamic tradition mirrors this “slide,” as is perhaps evidenced by some of the grim assessments in this volume, and in the work of many others. Take, for example, Burkard Sievers’ (1999, 2006) important work on what he metaphorically refers to as the “psychotic organization.” In line with how many others have commented on contemporary organizational forms, Larry Gould and I (2005) describe a kind of disassociative, rigid and sterile environment that has emerged in many modern global organizations over the last 10 years. We discuss the mismatch between the profound transformations in organizational structures and practices that have accompanied technology-intense globalization of corporations and the rudimentary sentient systems, the development of which has not kept pace.

An Intellectual Legacy

Harkening back to the early Tavistock breakthrough studies in coal mines (Trist & Bamforth, 1951) which explored the possibilities inherent in relating task and sentient systems, our analysis posits the idea that we are currently in a transitional state that mirrors, to some extent, the moment in the coal mines where advanced technologies were implemented without recognition of the role of the sentient system in overall production capacity. The “long wall” method was optimized for new technology but ignored the impact of the human sub-system and, as a result, failed to meet expectations. Based on research, the “short wall” method was designed as an alternative approach. While it did not utilize the full technological potential, it created the conditions in which technological advances could be matched with an enabling sentient system, resulting in an overall increase in productivity. Today’s version of the short-wall method for modern global enterprise remains to be discovered.

One thing that stands out about the “short-wall” method is that it created the conditions which fostered behavior, attitudes, and perceptions that resembled the depressive position. The Kleinian inheritance leaves us with the recognition that organizations are, so to speak, “floating” on a reservoir of psychotic anxieties. Primitive phantasies and impulses are elicited by the conditions of organizational life – confrontation with complex and uncertain tasks, the challenges of collaborating in the context of group life, and how authority relations resonate with our earliest experiences. The resulting tendencies toward splitting, projection, projective identification, and other defensive maneuvers in organizational life are well documented.

Along with the organizational parallels to Klein’s paranoid-schizoid position, the systems psychodynamic tradition has also explored those features of organizational life that work against those predispositions and that work to elicit a different pattern of defenses in participants – those that more closely resemble the functioning characteristic of Klein’s depressive position, where thinking is complex and sensitive to a changing environment, where grandiosity and persecution give way to mature interpersonal relations, where the personal and institutional “vectors” of organizational life can be reasonably integrated, and where sophisticated collaboration can emerge out of a shared sense of purpose.

Those configurations that elicit the more mature, integrated levels of functioning have, to be sure, evolved as the nature of organizational and industrial life has changed so profoundly from the late industrial era when Rice, Trist and other Tavistock researchers were exploring the “seam” between task and sentient systems, to the transitional post-industrial era characterized by knowledge work, increasing rates of change and environmental turbulence, to our current state of affairs, in which the digital revolution has propelled us vastly further into new realms of organizational life. Today the building blocks of stable hierarchy and the small group as a unit of work have been superseded by networks, virtual groups, and loosely-coupled contract-based systems.

Building on Bion’s (1961, 1970) thinking, the idea of “containment” became central to the quest for organizational configurations that promote “depressivity.” From these explorations, seminal concepts emerged: primary task definition; opportunities to explore and “metabolize” the emotional experience arising from the work situation; approaches to leadership that counteracted the projective pulls to either omnipotence or denigration; the “boundary stance”

that provided for control while respecting the maturity and responsibility of members; and structures in which task interdependencies were suitably matched with corresponding sentient systems. The effects of creating better alignment between the organizational factors have been well documented, as has the distress such change often created for those in the “surround” of such change efforts.

But the world in which these insights and principles were created and in which they offered powerful “remedies” for regressive work environments has largely disappeared. The wonderful collection of essays in “The Unconscious at Work” (Obholzer & Roberts 1994) stands as a symbol, in my mind, for the divergence between the perspectives developed in the systems psychodynamic tradition and the world as it was emerging. In essay after essay, the loss of effective containing structures for powerful emotional experience in “helping organizations” is described. The debilitating impact on professionals and clear evidence of the degrading effect on care itself is clearly illustrated. While undoubtedly not the intent, the *effect* of the book has been instructive. Often it has served as a focal point for grievances about today’s healthcare organizations and for a kind of sentimental longing for the approaches to containment and depressivity that our tradition so brilliantly discovered and articulated. Grievance, as is explored by Spillius (1997) points toward the disturbance propelled by unaddressed loss.

Just as the transformation of organizational life created all sorts of disarray, the disappearance of numerous qualities that undergirded our understanding left many of us unmoored and at a loss. Twenty five years of social, economic, industrial and technological upheaval left a fragmented, shocked society with people searching for connection, hope and lost meaning. Symbol systems involving 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. In an earlier paper I suggested that the search for new meaning and connection is propelling the resurgence of religious hopefulness and, in its more primitive manifestation, a turn toward fundamentalism (Krantz 2006).

A key concern in this paper is the parallel between these wide-scale social developments and those in the field of systems psychodynamics. One hypothesis is that the shock to our

intellectual tradition is yet to be fully metabolized by its practitioners or, in other words, the loss of clarity and intellectual groundedness hasn't been sufficiently mourned to allow researchers to engage with the new forms of organizational life. Or, more specifically, hasn't allowed our tradition to seek out and understand where depressivity exists and can be strengthened in the context of the new.

Often I have had the association to trauma when thinking about our field and about social organizational life more generally. While being mindful of the danger of over-generalizing trauma, it does seem as though there are parallels between the impact of the massive social changes on contemporary organizational life and on our intellectual tradition as well. By definition, trauma overwhelms our usual abilities to cope and adjust, calling into question the most basic assumptions by which we organize our experience of ourselves, relationships and the world around us. The search for new meaning is an inherent part of efforts to cope with trauma. By meaning, I refer here to a sense of structure that is comprehensible and evident enough to create a sense of understanding of the world and our roles in it.

Links between mourning and adaptation to change have been explored by many researchers, tracing back to Melanie Klein's (1940) discussion of change and loss. She writes that 'any pain caused by unhappy experiences, whatever their nature, has something in common with mourning...the encountering and overcoming of adversity...entails mental work similar to that of mourning.' (ibid. p. 127). Without it the self is impoverished.

Coming full circle with my opening comments, my second hypothesis is that the trauma of social and organizational change and the divergence of our knowledge base from emergent reality has led researchers in our tradition to overlook the new sources of depressivity contained within the novel configurations. A corollary to this is that the over-emphasis on paranoid-schizoid features of contemporary organizational life is a manifestation of insufficient mourning on our part, producing a kind of sentimental yearning for the strategies of containment that have disappeared and a resentment of the new forms, in which the familiar sources of depressivity cannot be found. I offer the paper I wrote with Larry Gould, mentioned above, as one good example of this distorted stance (Krantz & Gould 2005).

The core concern of this paper, however, is about where can depressivity be found in today's organizations? Or, more precisely, what social defense systems (Menzies, 1961), are emerging in the context of new organizational forms that support and reinforce depressive functioning? I am taking the depressive position as the functional equivalent of hope in this analysis because where depressivity exists so too does creativity, meaning, and possibility for development. The remainder of this chapter explores some ideas that have started to form in my mind around this question. It may be worth noting at this junction that writing about hope is *in* organizations, not about hope *for* organizations, which I take as a related but distinct question. I offer three domains which provide opportunities for new defensive structures that support depressive-style functioning in modern organizations, and which bring the task and sentient structures into a more basic, mutually reinforcing, alignment:

1. Network-centered defenses;
2. Digital defenses;
3. The Individual-as-a-Whole and Knowledge Work

Network-centered defenses

In systems psychodynamic thinking, the backbone of containment has been appropriate structures, on one hand, and the small group with its ability to help people metabolize their experiences and to create meaningful interpersonal linkages, on the other. But stable small groups are no longer a key component of new organizations. They are transitory, *ad hoc* configurations made up of changing membership. Today's vital connective tissue, so to speak, is much more in the form of networks than groups now, characterized by diffuse boundaries and shifting linkages. Thinking about containment in the context of networks thus becomes a crucial question for bringing systems psychodynamics into contemporary analysis. Living near ground zero during 9/11 cast a new, very personal, understanding of the tasks of network containment. As the horrific events unfolded the social organization operated more like a web or network of stories passed along and slowly metabolized.

Perhaps the model of consultants “containing” emotional experiences of client groups and organizations needs to be re-thought in order to evolve an approach to working with the social ecology of ordinary trauma, anchored in systems psychodynamics. In communities, organizations, and private clinical practices, people are brimming with terrible stories, details and images. New research on networks in organizations similarly points to the potential for networks to elicit depressive functioning. When Ronald Burt (2002) studied the origin of innovative ideas in organizations, he discovered a correlation between the creativity and the degree of embeddedness in the sentient network of the organizations he studied. He did this in two steps. First a group of independent experts rated the quality of innovative, new ideas. Then, network analysis revealed a strong correlation between the originators of creative ideas and the measure of embeddedness in the organization’s social networks.

What we have to add to this domain of understanding remains to be discovered, although one promising arena is the “communities of practice” that are becoming an important structural element in organizations. A hybrid of formal and informal, these communities are increasingly focal points for knowledge workers and places of stability in the chaotic shifting worlds in which they work.

No one, as far as I know, has raised the question of the underlying emotional reality of communities of practice and how these dynamics support or impede creative exchange. Clearly, however, these communities function as social defense systems for professionals. The psychodynamics of network processes is unexplored territory that systems psychodynamic thinkers are uniquely situated to explore. To do so, however, Bion’s (1961) intellectual legacy, in which group dynamics are comprehensible in terms of bounded groups with shared tasks, will have to evolve into an understanding of projective processes in unbounded networks with shared purposes instead of shared tasks. Today, the concepts of small task groups, primary task, organizational processes as fictive family dynamics, and of sharply defined task definition often (though not always or in all contexts, to be sure) seem out of date, even quaint. To what extent have we, in the field of system psychodynamics, become analogous to the drunk looking for the lost key under the nearby street lamp, where it is easier to see?

Digital Defenses

Most of the work that I have seen concerning electronically mediated communication focuses on its regressive features. Primitive impulses and emotional responses are readily elicited and in turn amplified as communications make their way through impersonal internet linkages. The potential for manifestation of paranoid-schizoid dynamics is quite high and seemingly just under the surface of listserv discussions and other mediums of internet communication. Much has been made of the anti-developmental nature of electronically mediated communication, since people can interact without the experience of vulnerability and potentially humiliation (Weinberg 2005; Czander 2007). It is easy to experience the decay in communication that accompanies on-line interaction since many of the “multiple channels” that characterize in-person interaction are stripped away, depleting the sense of complex, layered cueing and signaling that comprises rich communication. Others (e.g. Turkle 1995, 2005) have considered the developmental potential of online relatedness since it provides opportunities to explore different aspects of the self.

Yet as we become more sophisticated about electronically mediated relationships and – most importantly – as learning occurs, we see new ways in which digital capabilities can support sophisticated interrelations rather than diminishing them. Gradually, additional channels and layers are re-introduced as technology becomes more capable. Video conferencing and other deeper channels of electronic communication are the most obvious, but what I want to highlight here is the new arena of virtual worlds. In particular, I am interested in the extent to which new electronic capabilities create opportunities for the emergence of highly effective social defense systems that foster authentic relatedness and thereby support depressive functioning in the newly dispersed, fragmented organization.

The most visible indication that I have seen is Second Life, a very large virtual world in which millions of participants operate avatars who participate in a meta-world. As the capabilities of “Second Life” have grown, new and interesting phenomena occur that hint at yet new social defense structures that will be developed to contain experience and enable collaboration at high levels of sophistication. This virtual world has grown so large and extensive that the barrier between the virtual and real world has become semi-permeable. Many major corporations are now functioning in Second Life, for example, in order to expose their

goods and services to the avatars representing potential customers. Sweden operates an embassy in Second Life, as do many other quasi-governmental and NGO organizations. Its economy has gotten so large and dynamic, that its designers have employed an economist to regulate money supply and other financial system properties. If we assume that the kinds of capabilities represented by Second Life, and other similar virtual worlds, are in an early stage of development poised for dramatic expansion new possibilities are created for group collaboration, distance interaction, and complex relatedness

What strikes me as particularly interesting about this in terms of organizational life and systems psychodynamic thinking is that it has moved interaction beyond shared communication into the realm of shared experience. In one sense it is quite virtual, but in another sense quite real, more so than other electronic group work applications. As organizations are able to create virtual worlds that enable people to share important experiences as they work together, such as “traveling” to satellite imaged remote places and sharing experiences, new emotional dynamics will arise that we have the tools to explore. Equally possible is the prospect of thinking about how “virtual sentient systems” will emerge and how they might be related meaningfully to the “virtual task systems” that are utilized to enable dispersed people to think and make decisions together. New electronic capabilities are likely to create opportunities for computer-mediated social defense systems to counteract the regressive pulls associated with the fragmentation, boundarylessness and disarray so commonplace in contemporary organizations.

A similarly emerging form of electronically mediated connectedness are “relational Agents” (Bickmore 2003), computer agents designed to establish and maintain long-term social-emotional relationships. These are computer generated avatars capable of emulating face-to-face interaction, including hand gestures, facial expressions and body posture. A recent illustration of relational agents showed “virtual doctors” interacting with patients. Many patients, primarily those from different socio-economic strata, were shown to be more comfortable with relational agents. Patients felt no time pressure, as they were able to spend as much time as they wanted with the doctor, asking questions and repeating them if they wanted information reiterated. The virtual physicians also provide deep educational opportunities; not only explaining medical matters but being able to show illustrative images through linked databases.

When automatic tellers were introduced, many people resented the introduction of impersonal machine-based transactions as a replacement for human contact with tellers. Now, however, I am under the impression that ATM's are much preferred over tellers for their convenience, speed, accuracy, and the real-time availability of money. Why not the same with "virtual doctors" for entry-level medical treatment? Eric Miller (e.g. 1993) wrote about the dangers of excessive dependency in the patient-doctor relationship. We know that the internet has mitigated this danger by equipping patients with vast amounts of information with which to manage their relationships with physicians and health care institutions, shifting the relationship to one premised more on depressive modes of thought than the more primitive dependent pattern.

The Individual-as-a-Whole and Knowledge Work

Systems psychodynamic thinking centers on the group. Growing out of the group relations and systems traditions, its premise is that the individual is understood in context and by context. Focusing on the individual level of analysis is somewhat *verboten* to the extent that doing so is often reflexively considered a form of scapegoating.

In suggesting that organizations no longer contain individuals but rather individuals contain organizations, Gordon Lawrence (2006) points toward new ways of understanding the capacity to think and to work with organizations. In a similar vein, Trist and Perlmutter (1986) attempted to understand the challenges of functioning in the post-industrial order by exploring the fragility and vulnerability resulting from the turbulent environments that were coming to characterize modern organizations. Under the "hyper-turbulent environments" first postulated by Emery and Trist (1968) they predicted, and that are commonplace today, they imagined that the individual, rather than the institution or system, would become the "leading part" and the agent of change. We were entering, as they saw it, the age of the person. Building on Ackoff and Emery's seminal work, *On Purposeful Systems*, (1972), they suggest that the capacity for purposeful ideal-seeking behavior will provide the only true ballast and grounding in a hyper-turbulent world.

Perhaps the emergence of executive coaching can illuminate this dynamic. If the person does, in fact, contain the system, then coaching and working with institutions are

indistinguishable from one another. Finding the link between the person and the role also becomes fused with examining the connection between the sentient and tasks systems, putting the potential of coaching in a new perspective, as well illustrated by the recent work *Coaching In Depth* (2006).

The arc of thinking from Freud through Klein, Jaques and Menzies points to the crucial importance of individual and then social defenses for human functioning, work and growth. Many of the traditional defenses that have helped people bind the intense anxieties associated with worklife have been lost along with the stable social and economic order that has imploded in the face of new forces. Many writers have identified ways in which these changes have evoked regressive pressures on organizational members. Given what may be thought of as a “figure-ground reversal” between the individual and the group, perhaps it is now time for systems psychodynamic thinkers to relinquish the “ideology of the group” and begin searching for ways in which depressive dynamics radiate from the individual to the group rather than *vice versa*.

Another perspective on this issue stems from the shift from material goods to ideas as the main creator of wealth in the new digital age. The world of “things” is finite – there is only so much gold, etc., creating the impetus throughout history for people to fight over natural resources. Now the greatest value is created through ideas. Google, to offer but one illustration, is now worth more than any car maker. What do we understand about the strategies of emotional containment for anxieties associated with knowledge work? Systems psychodynamics, in my view, has paid too little attention to the impact of knowledge work and its predominance in contemporary organizations. It is the idea that defines the Mystic in Bion’s (1970) schema, and ideas that defines the fit between container and contained, ideas shaped by emotional reality, to be sure. It is precisely the link between emotion and idea that creates the great potential for systems psychodynamic thinking to play a valuable role in the knowledge world.

The psychodynamic dimensions of knowledge work are profound. Knowledge work is about conversation, and it emerges through relationships. Talking and listening are how knowledge workers learn, innovate, contribute, and change. Value gets added through collaborative conversation. Work, in this context, is intensely personal. Because it has to do first with ideas and knowledge, rather than products and services, work begins with the self. It is

a fusion of intuition and experience, informed by decoding patterns discerned in the broader context. In every decision, every conversation, knowledge workers test an aspect of their own personal take on the world. Every decision is a prediction about the future, based on assumptions carried forward from the past – a past increasingly disconnected from the future.

Commoditizing knowledge, in ways that we see emerging today, may function as a social defense against the anxieties and phantasies stimulated both by the essential vulnerability entailed by knowledge work and by the collaboration that depends on linking minds in this way. Bion's (1962, 1970) ideas about the links between thought and feeling point us in the direction of exploring the task-sentient boundary in the context of knowledge work, though it is a boundary that is difficult to even locate. Learning how task-related anxieties are manifested in the forums that contain conversation, in the thought processes and conversations of knowledge workers and in the way that problematic situations are constructed in the mind are points of connection holding enormous potential.

Leaders of knowledge work are increasingly called upon to manage something that might be thought of as an “idea chamber” so that knowledge workers can risk trusting their own thoughts and feelings. Miller & Rice's (1967) formulation that management is about managing boundaries, not people, clearly relates to a knowledge context. It poses challenges for which we have significant intellectual machinery – challenges of creating contexts in which people can learn publicly, risking personal exposure in the service of developing shared understanding, and collaborating in such a way that vulnerability is neither hidden nor pathologized (Hirschhorn, 1988, 1990).

Conclusion

Hope, at least mature hope (Krantz, 2005) can be found in organizations where people can take up roles, work with passion and creativity, make meaningful contribution to meaningful tasks (Sievers 1986, 1994) and develop themselves and their organizations simultaneously. Yet, as we know from the systemic psychodynamic tradition, this “space” between person and role is under constant pressure from the painful anxieties and primitive unconscious forces that are stimulated in organizational life. Many of the organizational underpinnings that previously

helped people resist regression to paranoid-schizoid patterns of thought and behavior have disappeared as organizations have transformed, making people even more vulnerable to regressive pulls.

A major challenge for the new knowledge-based, global, fragmented, ever shifting network-oriented organization is to discover new social defense systems – structures, techniques, policies, practices, etc. – that will organically reinforce depressive modes of thought and behavior. The leading edge of such characteristics can be seen in the three arenas discussed here – networks, information systems, and in conditions engendered by knowledge-type work. No doubt others are emerging and will be mobilized to support integrated thought and whole object relations, and creating hope in the process.

The field of systems psychodynamics mirrors many aspects of this change in organizational form and the challenges posed by the loss of familiar patterns of adaptation. Our intellectual “machinery” rendered the impact of work-related anxiety and unconscious forces visible in the everyday functioning of organizations, and, from this, emerged ways of thinking about how organizations can support the depressive, integrated functioning of its members. Now our own thinking must evolve in correlation with the profound transformations of organizations themselves. Otherwise we will be left looking for effective social defense systems where they can no longer exist, yearning for solutions suited to earlier conditions and likely to over-emphasize the paranoid-schizoid. Doing so requires re-thinking and re-applying many basic concepts so they pertain to the new circumstances.

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