

Psychoanalysis, Organisations, and Communities

Angela Lacerda Nobre
ESCE-IPS, Portugal

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the many hidden dimensions of human actions within the organisational environment. It considers the practice of the theory of psychodynamics and the role of consultants engaging with a client organisation. Creating shared meaning within a community is discussed within the context of situatedness, understanding, and discursiveness. A psychological framework, it is argued, enables a clearer understanding and facilitates development.

THE HIDDEN DIMENSION OF MEANING CREATION

A psychoanalytical approach to organisations highlights the fact that there are many hidden dimensions to humans' actions. The possibility of taking those dimensions into account, and of using them and exploring them in a positive and constructive way, is a critical move within current organisational environments, characterised by high levels of complexity.

The epistemology of knowledge and philosophy of science pose similar questions in the sense that they search for the sense-making process which legitimises specific theoretical approaches. This process may only be meaningful within a particular context, which in turn corresponds to a concrete community. Communities are not only the external arenas for social interaction, but they represent the identity and the social process through which knowledge is created, used, and shared. However, this bedrock function of communities is so subtle that it is almost invisible, with the consequence that its importance is often not acknowledged, and thus it risks remaining neglected.

Psychodynamics focuses on the inner structures which determine not only our actions, but also what we see, take into account, interpret, or take for granted. By gradually making these structures visible and explicit, it is possible to transform them through a developmental process that is characterised by continual reflection in action. Within a psychodynamic approach, both the inner structures and the developmental process are the result of a collective endeavour, as they are based upon specific and concrete relationships; that is, it is a social and relational based approach, both by focusing on current and previous relationships, as well as by co-constructing a new type of relationship with the psychoanalyst. This perspective is critical to the understanding of the fundamental role of communities as the ethos of relationships. If we take a reductionist perspective and state that knowledge is in people's heads, then we fail to take into account the critical issue of how it got there, and thus neglect the central importance of communities within an organisational setting.

When knowledge management stresses the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), or when organisational learning focuses on double-loop learning processes as the need to question our deep held assumptions (Argyris, 1992; Argyris & Schon, 1978), both areas are highlighting the crucial issue of dealing both with the superficial and with the deep aspects of organisational life, with the visible and the invisible, the obvious and that which is subtle and volatile, the individual and the social, and the inner and the outer worlds.

BACKGROUND

There are further examples of management and organisational literature that aim at less direct, lin-

ear, and mechanistic approaches to organisational life. The interest in the concept and theory of communities of practice is probably the most striking example (Wenger, 1999; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002a). Equally paradigmatic is Stacey's work on learning and knowledge creation through the focus on the complex responsive processes of organisations (2001). In parallel, there is a vast array of theories and initiatives which pay tribute to the richness and complexity of organisational life. These include the importance of informal learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990), the critical role of organisational meaning creation processes (Weick, 1995, 2001), the social aspects of information (Brown & Duguid, 2000), the question of the epistemology of knowledge (Von Krogh, 1995), and other organisational learning and knowledge management theories and approaches (Senge, 1990; Dixon, 2000; Davenport & Prusak, 1997).

In historical terms, the early works of the Tavistock Clinic, which was founded in 1920 in London, are an example of the boundary-crossing work of multidisciplinary teams that took a psychodynamic perspective. The socio-technical systems developed in the early 1950s within the same institution focused on self-regulating workgroups (Trist et al., 1963). The concepts of appreciative inquiry and of appreciative systems also pay a tribute to the reflection in action process, which was first developed by Vickers (1965, 1968; Chekland, 1999) and then further developed within the fields of soft systems theory and complex systems thinking. Lewin's (1951) action research methodology is another example of the need to constantly balance practice with a reflection over the same practice.

The works of Bakhtin and of his close circle of colleagues—works that were developed in the 1920s and the 1930s—are probably one of the richest examples of how a general theory of social philosophy may find its applications many decades later and in a wide range of areas (Brandist, 2002). The special meaning of dialogue, discourse, heteroglossia, or multiple voices is still being applied and developed within social science settings.

An application of a psychodynamic approach to organisational development may incorporate and integrate both earlier efforts to make sense of social interaction, as well as current theoretical approaches, such as those of knowledge management and of

organisational learning. Information is not only that which we communicate, the content of our messages; it is also and most importantly that which inhabits our imaginary, and which constitutes our projection of the world, of ourselves, and of our place and role in that world. The better we understand this meaning creation process, the better able are we to use it in a productive, as well as constructive and gratifying way. Again and again, this is never an isolated process suspended in a vacuum. It is always the child of a community.

PRACTICE AND THEORY

Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud are known as the philosophers of the suspect, as their work radically questioned the assumed beliefs of their time. Nietzsche claimed the death of God, opening the way for postmodernism. Marx called attention to the importance of social determinations, in the sense that individuals are fundamentally affected by the social class to which they belong. And Freud explored the unconscious with a radical theory which put under question the rationalist idea of human beings as autonomous, independent, and rational individuals.

Psychoanalysis can be seen as belonging to the hermeneutics of suspicion which, apart from Freud, is also represented by Marx and Nietzsche. All three of these had probed behind what they conceived as an illusory self-conscious to a deeper-lying, more unpleasant or 'shameful' one. In Freud it appeared as libido, in Marx as the economic interest, and in Nietzsche as the will to power. (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 95)

Habermas' critical theory refers to Marx and Freud as examples of those working on an emancipatory mode (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 125), though Foucault points in the opposite direction, stating the importance of monitoring, disciplining, and control in modern discourses.

There are certainly anti-emancipatory elements in both the practice and ideology of psychoanalysis...the movement may have helped to build a therapeutic culture which makes people

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