

The symbiotic lure: organizations as defective containers

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the psychodynamics of regression in organizations. First, the paper presents a brief critique of the rationalist and mechanistic approaches to organizations and their selective inattention to subliminal and unconscious aspects of organizational life, particularly regressive actions. Then, the association between psychological regression and organizational identity is explored with an emphasis on group psychology. Next, the symbiotic lure is introduced as a metaphor for understanding collective regression. Members react to their anxieties about change at work by denying their individual differences and psychologically merging with each another. This common form of regressive withdrawal among organizational participants under stress, threatens participation, consensual decision making, learning and effectiveness. Using Bion's notion of "container" and Winnicott's concept of a "holding environment," the author presents a brief example and discussion that clarifies the processes of change necessary for repairing the damaged organization and renewing its potential for democratic practices and effective service delivery.

Much of organizational studies has assumed that decisions and actions are guided by rational (logical and sensible) norms and intentional processes. The assumption of human nature in much of mainstream organization theory was that of a one-dimensional worker void of inner life. Consequently, many scholars persuaded their students that logic and rationality governed human behavior and decision-making in large, complex organizations. And, despite the progress of mainstream organization theories (March & Simon, 1958; Simon, 1961; Weick, 1969; 1995), a fixation with the "conscious" levels of organization and a near void to most subliminal and hidden features predominated the field (Field, 1974).

Key words: container, holding, organizational regression, symbiosis

In his introduction to the *The Irrational Executive*, Manfred Kets de Vries (1984, p. xv-xvi) called attention to the notion of rationality in management theory as well. He wrote: "The notion of the idealized, completely rational decision maker, comparable to the classical *homo economicus* of economic theory, living in a world of optimal choices, has never really been abandoned. It appears that most management theorists, like the economists before them, have been reluctant to go beyond the directly observable and pay attention to the determining effects of intra-psychic processes on individual motivation." The introduction of psychoanalysis to organization studies has tried to address these concerns and has, consequently, challenged the

underlying assumptions of the nature of human relationships at work that govern much of management and organization theory.

In his article, "The Unconscious Organization," George Field wrote:

The basic reasons why we largely ignore hidden levels that harbor the non-rational organizational elements inhere in our American ethos. As a people, we are oriented toward action and efficiency, a trait that has yielded astounding economic output and technological achievement while simultaneously producing pathological social conditions that are an almost inevitable by-product of our preoccupation with mechanical and scientific approaches to problems that do not readily lend themselves to traditional mechanistic solutions hampered by methodological constraints. (1974, p. 333-334)

Interfering with "progress" and holding-up the wheels of production for purposes of reflection runs contrary to our American customs. The predominance of mechanistic and scientific approaches to the study of organizations has supplanted insight and relevance with method and rigor. The belief of the superiority of rational approaches to organizations has limited American scholars abilities to understand organizations that engage in repressive, irresponsible, destructive and seemingly juvenile acts.

As a premise for understanding the psychologically regressive and destructive side of organizations, I wish to emphasize the presence of a dialectical tension between non-rational (seemingly illogical, non-sensible, subliminal and hidden) and rational (seemingly logical, sensible, evident and observable) forces in organizational life itself. Accordingly, I submit that the field of organizational studies requires a socio-psychoanalytic paradigm for examining the nature of rational and non-rational actions. In so doing, I define organizations in the following manner: organizations are inter-subjective, psychological structures of meaning, affect, and experience that interact with and, at times, contradict their social, economic, and political structures. Thus, revealing these contradictory and conflicting powers connotes defining organizations as fundamentally human. For instance, people come to work and *fill* particular roles of responsibility and authority. They bring their *representational worlds*¹ comprised of organized personal experiences that, in turn, influence their (participants') perceptions and wishes at work. Strategy, structure, and technology are, thereby, instruments of unconscious and non-rational as well as conscious and rational forces of humankind. In order to better understand these contradictions, organization theorists and researchers will have to take into account the presence of unconscious defensive and regressive human motives at work alongside their consideration of conscious and intentional actions.

Organizations are symbolically represented to the external world through a variety of artifacts such as posted mission statements, organizational charts, written policies, climates of professionalism, formality or informality, interior office designs, architecture, corporate logos and the like. These symbols of organizational culture gain

their meaning through a deeper understanding of what the artifacts themselves signify in the minds of participants (members as well as clients and customers). Such deeper meaning is accessible through an understanding of the unconscious psychological mechanisms of transference, projection and introjection, and in particular *compromise formation* (discussed below). For example, in joining the organization, individual members eventually *transfer* conscious and unconscious desires onto their *projected* image of the agency (or company) and in particular its executive leadership. Thus, in addition to viewing organizations as open systems for processing inputs, conversions, and outputs, they may be thought of as psychological *containers*² (Bion, 1959) for members' unconscious projections of aggression, expectations and ideals, anxieties and conflicts. The organization-in-the-mind of the participants can be understood to comprise the organizational identity.

Regression and the psychodynamics of organizational identity

Organizational identities are reflected in artifacts, values, assumptions and unconscious collective desires, which are communicated by affect and experienced via projection of the representational world of its members onto the organization and its leadership. If one is interested in and appreciates the interpretive value of depicting the inter-subjective structures of organizations, transcending the surface level of artifactual and social data is essential to the research endeavor (Allcorn, 1995; Diamond, 1993; Stein, 1994). Moreover, understanding the psychodynamics of group membership may be central to interpreting organizational identity.

Group membership entails an intra-personal compromise between individual demands for dependency and relative autonomy. The mere presence of a group, Wilfred Bion observed, presumes a defensive state of psychological *regression*³ among participants. Referring to Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Bion wrote: "Substance is given to the phantasy that the group exists by the fact that the regression involves the individual in a loss of his 'individual distinctiveness' (Freud, 1921, p. 9)... It follows that if the observer judges a group to be in existence, the individuals composing it must have experienced this regression" (Bion, 1959, p. 142). For Freud and Bion, psychological regression coincides with group membership-when joining a group adults may experience themselves in child-like roles. At work, individual uniqueness may need to be reconciled with relative dependency and group identity.

Anxiety and regressive behavior among organizational participants may be provoked by a focal event. For example, a director's mere "thinking out loud" to her staff of her intent to reorganize may be experienced by them as her general lack of confidence in their abilities to manage effectively. Subjectively, her staff may experience this as her withdrawal of support (loss of the good parent). Staff may then come to feel unjustly treated and, consequently, regress to a childlike mental state of

totalistic, bifurcated thinking, whereby people and objects are categorized (split) into all-or-nothing terms. Staff may further come to view human relationships at work as black or white; good or bad. They may feel like helpless victims and come to perceive themselves as “all good,” and others via splitting and projection (another section, department, division, or director) as victimizers and “all bad.” The perceived removal of organizational support based upon the expressed intent to reorganize may trigger an escape among staff into an alternate reality. In sum, we assume an uncertain degree of psychological regression takes place in part as a consequence of group and organizational membership and in part as a response to a stressful focal event.

Accordingly, in a state of psychological regression, mature mental states of cognition become increasingly primitive and immature and, thereby, diminished in their capacity to solve complex problems of human relations in the workplace. The innocent mention of change or reorganization can induce regressive psychodynamics as the above description indicates. However, organizational life may be experienced as personally gratifying and constructive as well.

With reflective thinking, group processing, and learning from experience of focal events or critical incidents, group and organizational affiliation may promote democratic processes and more effective service delivery on behalf of the “public good.” Progressive groups and organizations may exist as the outcome of intra- and inter-personal compromise reconciling individual needs for independence against demands for belonging. From an intra-personal perspective, group and organizational identity are an effect of a compromise formation--a product of conflict that signifies both parties (the repressed impulse and the repressing agency) to the conflict. Moore and Fine (1990, p. 43) describe compromise formation further as “the irrational, affective, and behavioral resultants of attempts at solution of conflict among and between psychic agencies and the outside world.” Certainly, individuals’ attachment to work organizations signifies a compromise between two opposing forces--the repressed and the repressing agency.

The compromise works because it secures attachment (to the outside world of objects) without the experience of internal conflict with bad images of self and the needed other. The bad images cease to exist, thereby frequently permitting other, often opposite feelings to emerge, such as love and approval. Joining and participating in organizations involve ego adaptation and adjustment. Hence, the individual strikes a compromise between the unconscious, irrational forces of personality and the assumed rational demands of organization. Such compromises are worked out in the context of the social structure through role performances and interpersonal relationships. Individuals reshape their assigned roles to fit their unconscious organizational demands more closely. Personal authority is empowered and given voice in a compromise with the hierarchical authority.⁴

At the heart of this conflict that eventuates in a compromise is the problem of narcissism--the state of perfection and symbiosis from which we begin life, first inside and then outside of the womb (Diamond, 1993, p. 13-14). Narcissistic demands for self-aggrandizement, grandiosity, love, admiration, recognition, and idealization, are unique to each individual worker. Thus, the "psychological contract" between self and organization assumes individual distinction based upon the quality and quantity of narcissistic motives for self-esteem. In other words, the compromise between self and organization will be affected by the degree of necessary narcissistic supplies derived from the original relationship to the maternal object. Excessive narcissistic self-object demands at work will promote regressive actions and difficulty in participation, collaboration, and consensus-building.

In sum, the presence of a dialectical tension between psychological and social structures of the workplace is crucial to democratic organizational processes and outcomes. And, despite the regressive power of groups and organizations, participants with the individual and collective capacity for conflict resolution and consensus-building will be better positioned to promote more mature group and organizational processes that support problem-solving, policy-implementation, and service delivery. Individual psychological resilience (ego strength and integrity) is a prerequisite for adaptation to the constantly changing and reconfigured postmodern organization.

In order to better understand this dialectical tension between psychological and social structure, a theory is needed to explain the forces that tend to pull, seemingly rational (logical and sensible) participants along regressive and destructive paths that oppose intended progressive and constructive, strategic direction. If we take seriously the dialectical tension between social and economic forces (politics and markets) and psychological structures (intra- and inter-subjective processes), then we come to realize that members routinely and unwittingly engage in defensive (including regressive) psychodynamics that contradict rational and consensual processes at work. Furthermore, we come to acknowledge that these organizational psychodynamics limit and, in some instances, destroy participants' capacity for collaborative and cooperative action. However, psychological regression is a human fact of organizational life and is therefore inevitable. We can never eliminate it. Organizational leaders will need to learn how to respond effectively and appropriately to these seemingly counter-productive forces within people and groups. Leaders like consultants to organizational change, will need to provide containers for their workers' anxieties.

The symbiotic lure: organizations as defective containers

To help explain the collective regressive pull, I put forward the psychoanalytic concept of the *symbiotic lure*; later, I will show how the concept can be built upon to construct a theory of organizations. Participants under the influence of annihilation

anxiety regress into an unconscious collective position of oneness, dedifferentiation, homogeneity and excessive dependency. Most observers of group life within work organizations can attest to this common, yet tacit, strategy among individuals in groups for coping with the intensity of critical incidents. Participants tend to avoid making unique contributions or advocating positions--often looking to the leader or leaders for the simple solution to a complex problem. It seems as if any solution will do as long as it is pronounced by someone in a position of authority and quickly agreed to and supported by everyone else.

In order for participants to experience such intense threat, workers must perceive them-*selves* to be in a psychologically-dangerous situation--one that threatens their internalized self-image, their identity. Such a threat to self-other boundaries and self-concept promotes psychological regression. In part the psychological regression is informed by internal representations of self and other and in part it is influenced by organizational and managerial actions at work.

Winnicott (1965) identified two types of psychological regression: 1) a withdrawal into dependency and 2) a schizoid withdrawal. The symbiotic lure encompasses both of these forms of regressive flight. The former refers to a self-object merger (Kohut, 1977) or sadistic-masochistic relationship (Fromm, 1941), and the latter connotes an internal resignation into a self-object world of fragmentation and splitting of oneself and others into absolutes of good and bad, love and hate, accepting and rejecting, and so on. Fromm wrote: "I suggest calling the aim which is at the basis of both sadism and masochism: symbiosis. Symbiosis, in this psychological sense, means the union of one individual self with another self (or any other power outside of the own self) in such a way as to make each lose the integrity of its own self and to make them completely dependent on each other. The sadistic person needs his object just as much as the masochistic needs his. Only instead of seeking security by being swallowed, he gains it by swallowing somebody else. In both cases, the integrity of the individual self is lost" (1941, p. 180). The symbiotic lure in the workplace depicts the participants deepest fears of engulfment and self-annihilation often stemming from critical incidents that challenge the status quo.

It is not my intent to argue, however, that these unconscious forces need to be suppressed in a manner that seals them off to member consciousness. On the contrary, these social forces and desires require conscious acknowledgment of their presence and integration in everyday organizational processes and outcomes--this is what I mean by requisite "dialectical tension" for group and organizational well-being and what Glass (1995) signifies as the psychodynamic bases for democratic processes. Suppression of the psychological structure of organization is certainly not the answer and, when attempted, will result in social denial, distorted communications, twisted and distrustful human relations as well as destruction of creativity, innovation, and

consensual decision making. Acknowledging the interplay between conscious and rational and unconscious and non-rational forces at work is critical.

Bion's concepts of container and contained are introduced to describe subjects (contained) engaged in managing their aggressive feelings via a process of externalization in which the subject locates the "bad" introjects in an object (container) such as *another* individual or institution. In other words, a common form of projections at work includes members relocating painfully negative introjects (bad images) inside their leaders and organizations. Hence, organizations and organizational leaders often serve a containing function for members projected aggression and anxieties. When organizational leaders fail to "contain" members' aggression and annihilation anxieties, regressive psychodynamics pull members into symbiotic and de-differentiated relationships and the symbolic return to the maternal object. Thus, it is this uncontained deeply regressive desire [what Person (1995) calls a congruent fantasy]⁵ that may take the organization, and its members down a destructive path of distorted relations, totalistic ideologies, and violence.

In contrast, when organizational leaders and their cultures serve as effective containers of the emotional life, they come to symbolize maternal, "*good enough*" *holding environments* (Winnicott, 1965) that provide safe and secure psychological space for administering to the memberships' internal world of object relations. This does not, however, mean we want to transform all work organizations into therapeutic organizations. Rather, it is intended to stress the importance of a *transitional space* in which members can explore their organizational identities, painful and anxiety-provoking processes of change, counter-productive and destructive managerial practices, and the like. Organizational leaders and their members need to encourage reflective processes for learning, conflict resolution, and change as a vehicle for countering suppression, psychological regression, and defensive actions. It is a workplace culture that acknowledges emotions rather than suppressing them; it is thereby an organizational climate in which conflict may be addressed as well.

In *Psychosis and Power*, James M. Glass (1995, p.120) views the group as the agent of unconscious fantasy. Groups, according to Glass, are capable of violently imposing their power on others:

Groups whose identity derives from collective acts of violence may be auto-engendered, ...evolving not around a central admonitory figure [for example, Freud's primal father] but around the group itself. The group makes frenzied efforts to forge an identity by destroying difference and fusing with an omnipotent maternal ego ideal. In its regression toward oneness, the group may push its individual members toward less-differentiated and therefore more totalizing and absolute. forms of psychological organization...

Paying attention to homogeneous regressive forces in groups and organizations is essential to our ability to confront and alleviate potentially violent outcomes perpetrated on others. Absolutist ideologies and belief systems may signify the potential dangers of defective emotional containers within group and organizational cultures. In the absence of psychological regression “secondary process mental operations appear as the values of negotiation, tolerance, and limitation (democratic values);” in the presence of psychological regression and the pull toward oneness, “primary process operations take shape as intolerance, jingoism, racist and tyrannical appeals to action and regression” (p. 15). In other words, the organization as *defective container*, incapable of recognizing communications of affect, fosters a breakdown in self and other boundaries and, consequently, promotes predominance of primary processes (over secondary processes) thereby presenting a threat to democratic and consensual practices in the organizational culture-human, ideological, and institutional prerequisites to a fascist (or totalitarian) state of mind.

The fascist self and the symbiotic lure

A deeper understanding of the symbiotic lure and its psychologically-regressive force in groups and organizations, is critical to our confronting fascist and totalitarian human proclivities. In his book, *Being a Character*, Christopher Bollas (1992) writes of the fascist state of mind and the potential for genocidal violence: “Whatever the factors that sponsor any specific social act of genocide, the core element in the fascist state of mind (in the individual or in the group) is the presence of an ideology that maintains its certainty through the operation of specific mental mechanisms aimed at eliminating all opposition” (p.200). Bollas goes on to say members engage in a special mental act of *binding*⁶ in which the individual rejects all doubts and counter-views. “The mind ceases to be complex, achieving a simplicity held together initially by bindings around the signs of ideology” (p.201). Ideology, then, as a signifier of organizational identity and culture, represents unconscious assumptions and desires of participants. However, an ideology aimed at destroying all opposing views and one driven to maintain the certainty of its righteousness and correctness, is a sign of simplicity triumphing over complexity and the regressive withdrawal into a primitive state of oneness and homogeneity--the essence of the symbiotic lure.

In the symbiotic lure, organizational members unconsciously forego their individuality for the group and organizational ideal. Freud, Bion, Chasseguet-Smirgel, Glass, and others explain this as the transfer of individual ego ideal to the ideal of the group (or organization). The observation that organizational members engage in denial and suppression of differences and separateness between and among themselves under these regressive circumstances may be of little surprise--certainly Bion (1959) observed this phenomenon in his pioneering work on groups.

This psychological regression in groups and organizations, however, represents emotionally primitive (infantile and pre-oedipal), modes of object relations in which

self-other boundaries breakdown and apparently disappear. The binding power of symbols and the “collapse of the generative dialectical interplay of modes of experience” forces participants into a *paranoid-schizoid*⁷ "entrapment in a world of things-in-themselves" (Ogden, 1989, p. 77). Bombarding objects (people, ideas, symbols) are cognitively and emotionally identified by simple categories of right and wrong, good and bad.

In their book, *The Neurotic Organization*, Kets de Vries and Miller (1984) discuss three forms of confused superordinate-subordinate relations that include binding, expelling, and proxy modes.

Superiors operating in the binding mode view the environment as forbidding and hostile. Confidence is placed only in a few cherished subordinates. These executives feel that they live in a world where nobody can be trusted, where one must be on guard and in charge. They conclude: “This view of the world creates a need for a superior to protect and control the subordinates he is most attached to... The price subordinates must pay...is extreme loyalty and devotion to their superior. They must back all of his projects, act according to his wishes, and never disagree on matters of substance. They [subordinates] are locked into a golden cage. (1984, p. 101-102)

In this state of annihilating anxiety and psychological *splitting*,⁸ debate over differences of opinion, values, and ideas is non-existent. Doubt is suspiciously absent. The implicit assumption of absolute positions seems to govern interpersonal relationships and threaten the dialectical tension. Consensual reality seems out of reach (Glass, 1995). Under these conditions, managing organizational change effectively and humanely and promoting participation in the workplace are quite unlikely. Members’ autonomy and relative independence are unconsciously replaced by narcissistic fusion and dedifferentiation that forfeits what Argyris calls (Argyris & Schön, 1978/1996) “advocacy with inquiry” and the “organizational dialectic” necessary for surfacing conflicts and contradictions required for “double-loop” learning and development--the cognitive prerequisite for reflective and intentional processes of heightened awareness at work. In the final analysis, the eradication of opposition and dialectical tension, as Glass points out, poses a grave threat to democracy, the self and the group (1995).

The symbiotic lure signifies contagious, primal emotions that pollute otherwise reasonable decision making, strategic planning, and actions taken by organizational participants. For example, the mere mention of structural change by management in the workplace will provoke anxieties and insecurities among members. Such a reaction among workers is not uncommon and not necessarily alarming in and of itself. However, if ignored, denied, and unacknowledged by participants, it can deteriorate into a problem over time. In those instances where management promotes suppression of affective responses and reactions as well as severe limits on horizontal and vertical participation and communications, a failure to contain anger and aggression is evident.

In unreflective, “rational” systems in which participation and worker input is limited or non-existent as well as circumstances in which policy changes or market forces impose organizational (system-wide) transformation, the regressive withdrawal of workers into the symbiotic lure is possible. In such instances, individuals may withdraw into excessive dependency relationships-typical of what may be called organizational co-dependence (Allcorn, 1992; Goff & Goff, 1991).

Under the influence of the symbiotic lure, organizational participants seek a safe haven in primitive subjective (pre-oedipal) states of *imagined* union with the maternal object (often symbolized by the organization and its leaders). Consequently, self-object differentiation is obliterated along with innovation, creativity, and independence. In sum, this infantile state of affairs produces a *schizoid*⁹ organizational culture in which members come to view relations to others as coercive and potentially annihilating. Under these conditions, successful responses to change among and between participants are unlikely.

Managing change against the tede of regressive forces

Managing (group and organizational) change productively requires a state of mind that enables participants to address the symbiotic lure as an unconscious regressive force within the group and organization. This reflective act requires a sensitivity to the psychological structure of organizational life and a heightened awareness of individual and cultural mechanisms that unwittingly promote denial and suppression of differences and interpersonal, intra- and inter-group conflict. For example, as a critical component of a comprehensive organizational intervention, the act of collaboratively analyzing through group discussion leaders and other members responses to prior crises and critical incidents is crucial. In so doing, members develop heightened awareness of their defensive and regressive routines, which inhibit learning and successful change.

Organizational participants, for example, may come to acknowledge that they colluded in social denial that assumed a defensive form of (what Bion calls) *flight* from facing a wicked problem in the workplace. In so doing, they assume responsibility and may feel empowered to act to resolve rather than avoid conflict in the future. They may further come to appreciate how this *withdrawal into dependency and resignation* then jeopardized conflict resolution and consensus-building, which are rooted in critical inquiry and (what Argyris calls) the *organizational dialectic*.¹⁰ Based upon participants understanding of psychodynamic conditions at work, they pay attention to the realization that members may search for simplistic solutions to complex problems--a common symptom of regressive forces at play in organizations. A brief illustration might be helpful.

During one consultation with a social agency undergoing profound change as the result of a shift in federal public policy, consultants found themselves challenged by a subculture of like-minded and seemingly polite and agreeable middle managers and staff. In this instance, the executive director of the agency was required to reorganize and did so without first assessing the readiness of his workforce to change. Furthermore, middle managers and their subordinates had no opportunity to provide input into the nature of (and rationale for) strategic change.

The director brought in consultants to help him “manage the change.” Here, in the mind of the executive director and not necessarily the consultants, “managing the change” meant “controlling” employee “reactions” (assumption of resistance to change)--an executive strategy consistent with and partly responsible for the current state of oppressive affairs. It was the director’s view that career civil servants are to be excluded from the influence of politics and that meant his staff did not need to share in the rationale for policy-driven strategic and structural change.

Simultaneous with his espoused and conscious philosophy of managing (and controlling) his workforce, the director was experiencing anticipatory anxiety about his staff’s hostile reaction to him. He feared their potentially violent hostility and rejection of him--feelings he shared in confidence with one of the consultants. In response to his internal feelings, the director operated on the assumption that in fact his managers and workers would react in the manner he had fantasized. When the consultant asked him to describe the imagery of rejection that came to mind, the director constructed a rather violent scene in which he was the victim of attack and found himself perishing in a pool of blood. The director worked harder to control their input and feedback and anticipated using his consultants to assist him in doing so--in the nature of a “reaction-formation.” Then, in anticipation of their director’s unwillingness to listen and facilitate feedback, agency workers perpetuated a defensive routine to protect themselves from their fears, hostilities, and anxieties about change. “Oh, he wouldn’t listen to us anyway,” several commented to the consultant. “It’s never done any good in the past, nothing’s changed,” others could be heard saying. “Oh, he will do whatever he wants to do anyway,” several others indicated.

Hence, potential problems related to the strategic change were concealed. Conflicts and differences of opinion and ideas between members were suppressed. Managers and subordinates came to mirror their executive's defensive response to change. In so doing, organizational participants unwittingly constructed a homogeneous culture of like-minded individuals, supported by a psychological structure of paranoid-schizoid modes of experience and totalistic thinking. Members were “not themselves,” they said to the consultants in retrospect.

Organizational members became containers of paranoia and the concomitant drive for de-differentiation and suppression of conflict; their director unwittingly contained these emotions in a manner that in turn influenced his oppressive style of conflict and change management. A congruent unconscious fantasy came to be shared by the director and his staff and this fantasy then came to dominate their agency in a powerful unconscious grasp of the symbiotic lure. Members acted as if they were of one mind and, therefore, did not articulate any problem areas related to the intended strategic change. Any admission on their part of problems would be an expression of discontent and anger or frustration. Such expression of emotion on behalf of participants was considered inappropriate and unacceptable by management. Therefore, none were forthcoming.

Homogeneous cultures such as the above are driven by primitive anxieties around separation and rejection. Projective identification and collusion between the executive director, middle management and workers, produced unconscious communications in which organizational participants came to share fears and anxieties tied to change. Under these circumstances, members feared being ostracized if they conveyed differences between themselves. Differentiation (for these participants) signified potential disconnection and loss of self at work or as in the director's view, the wrath of others' aggression. Change stimulated deeper feelings around uncertainty and loss of control. In this case, such feelings are experienced as intolerable. It is as if members fear a severing of the symbolic umbilical cord attaching them to work--a separation in which they find themselves lost in free-floating and weightless outer-space. The organization as a faulty container comes to signify the rejecting maternal object.

In this particular instance, a process of containment and holding had to be implemented by the consulting team. First, in a safe and non-retributive environment, middle managers and staff were given an opportunity with the consultants to voice their concerns and to analyze the organizational paradox. The managers complained harshly about their political director. In their complaints they voiced agreement their director could not possibly understand the "real" work of agency employees nor appreciate the needs of their clients and constituents. There seemed to be no differences of opinion or contrasting sentiments among them. The group simply targeted the director and established a clearly defined boundary between themselves and their director (and all things political)--a boundary that clarified blame by identifying the enemy and shutting down any opposition. Ironically, the director was engaged in the same sort of social defense system by excluding his staff from participating in key decision making and strategic planning. Bringing the group and their director back together with this new awareness enabled them to see how their action had perpetuated a schizoid culture driven by the symbiotic lure.¹¹ They had taken mutual flight into their internal worlds (within themselves as individuals and within the context of the group) of dependency, sameness and likeness.

The group of managers with some assistance could eventually come to see that they had created this womblike, emotional space within the confines of their group. The consultants could then help the managers and staff to see the product of their flight by treating the group as a Winnicottian holding environment¹² (a transitional space in which members could feel safe and secure) to explore their primitive experience of annihilation and persecutory anxiety. Appropriate system (horizontal and vertical) boundaries were, then, re-established and better managed for communication of problems and ideas about the organizational change.

Following intensive discourse around the rationale and form of strategic change, group members (director, managers, and workers) began to consider transitions in their thinking and feeling states and, further, entertained strategies for better coping and enabling a more effective transition in the workplace. This human process for change illustrated the function of workplace containers for managing emotionally-charged incidents--Winnicott's holding environment viewed here as a transitional space for coping with regressive psychodynamics and the pull of the symbiotic lure.

It must be stressed that such an intervention does not "fix" the symbiotic lure, rather it returns the organization to a "normal" state of dialectical tension. Further, the strength of the symbiotic lure--and the strong tendency of most organizations to succumb to it--rests in our cultural insistence on seeing organizations as "rational."

Conclusion

The unconscious intent of these primitive forces of regression, whether at the group or individual level of analysis, is to repair the fragmented self-object word experienced under the influence of annihilation anxiety. Through restoration of the "good enough holding environment," it is assumed that an effective container is produced for managing aggression and anxiety among members thereby sustaining the integrity of self-object relations and the reality of a dialectical tension between and among organizational participants.

Ironically, the force of psychological regression in some groups and organizations, fosters a flight of withdrawal into dependency and a paranoid-schizoid mode of experience characterized by mistrust and fragmentation of thoughts, emotions and relationships. Meaningful self and other boundaries are seemingly obliterated, producing absolutism and totality in the form of extremist ideologies, dangerous belief systems, and fascistic states of mind. In organizational life, the unsuccessful containment of psychodynamic regression renders conflict management and resolution impossible, encouraging unilateralism and top-down, oppressive methods of management that further perpetuate psychologically regressive work cultures. This vicious cycle of organized madness, driven by the symbiotic lure, suppresses

collaboration and consensual decision making and destroys the democratic spirit at work.

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ENDNOTES

¹ *Self representation* here refers to all aspects of objects, animate and inanimate, that are important to the individual and that find psychic representation as apart that person's *representational world*, an inner world of objects. (Moore & Fine, 1990)

² A designation for the basis of any relationship between two or more people, whether infant and mother, man and woman, or individual and society. In the most basic model, the infant projects a part of his or her psyche, especially uncontrolled emotions, to be contained by the mother, who absorbs them, "translates" them into specific meanings, and acts upon thoughtfully, the whole transaction in a transformation of the infant's projective identifications into meaningful thoughts. The concept approximates Winnicott's *holding environment* (Moore & Fine, 1990, p. 32).

³ A return to a more developmentally immature level of mental functioning. It usually occurs when a phase-appropriate mental organization is substantially disrupted. Regression is regarded as one of the mechanisms of defense. (Moore & Fine, 1990)

⁴ The nature of individual *transference* to the organizational hierarchy is another psychoanalytic way of conceptualizing the member's emotional attachment to organization. I have written of this elsewhere (Diamond, 1993).

⁵ In the congruent fantasy, two people have the same wishes and impulses and construct a daydream as a joint venture, creating what Hanns Sachs calls a "community of two," and shared fantasies can form the basis of communities of three or four, or more. The implicit bonding between fantasizers is grounded in appreciation of the shared wish; the sharing of the fantasy relieves the unpleasant feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety that often accompany wishes. Congruent fantasies include - joint revenge fantasies, death and rebirth fantasies (frequently seen in suicide pacts), and comrade-in-arms fantasies. Or two people may form a bond based on antisocial Bonnie and Clyde fantasies or us-against-the-world fantasies (Person, 1995, p. 123).

⁶ "...when representation freedom is foreclosed, signifiers Jack this freedom, as ideology freezes up the symbolic order, words becoming signs of positions in the ideological structure." For example, "when Michael Dukakis tried to introduce complex issues in the American presidential campaign of 1988, George Bush made the word "liberal" a sign of weakness visited upon the certain mind of doubt and complexity. To supplement his destruction of the symbolic order Bush made the American flag the sign of the difference between Dukakis and himself; sadly, it signified the end of discourse and the presence of an emergent Fascist frame of mind." (Bollas, 1992, p. 201)

⁷ In Kleinian theory, the infant projects love and hate onto the mother's breast, splitting it into a "good" (or gratifying) and a "bad" (or frustrating) object. The object is "idealized," that is, perceived as capable of providing unlimited gratification. The bad object, by contrast, becomes a terrifying persecutor. This position is therefore characterized by persecutory anxiety: the infant fears being destroyed by the bad object. Since the ego lacks adequate integration, it must resort to omnipotent denial to divest the persecuting object of reality or power. The term *schizoid* is employed, following Fairbairn, to indicate the splitting the infant's self undergoes in fantasy in order to achieve a suitable relationship to the goodness of the object. Anxiety over threatened, fantasized annihilation by persecutory internal objects is personified by the designation *paranoid*. The common denominator in the schizoid mechanisms is omnipotence. The infant, in an effort to exert omnipotent control over objects, bestows omnipotence upon them via projective identification and thereby is victimized by omnipotent persecutory objects. Exaggerated, split, persecutory, omnipotent aspects of the paranoid-schizoid position can be observed in such conditions as the borderline syndromes, other primitive mental disorders, and, to a lesser degree, in all human beings (Muore & Fine, 1990, p. 110) .

⁸ The separation of psychological representation according to their opposing qualities. The experiential representations that constitute self and object are primarily involved. Splitting is thought to play a major role in the normative unfolding of mental life, contributing to psychic organization. With development the splitting activity that

earlier facilitated organization takes on an executive quality, and its defensive functions are assumed by more advanced processes like repression. Splitting then occurs only under conditions of adaptive stress or psychopathology. (Moore & Fine, 1990, p. 183-84)

⁹ Schizoid characteristics may include: detachment, noninvolvement, withdrawness; sense of estrangement; lack of excitement or enthusiasm; indifference to praise or criticism; lack of interest in present or future; appearance cold, unemotional. Fantasy may include: the world of reality does not offer any satisfaction to me; my interactions with others will eventually fail and cause harm, so it is safer to remain distant. Dangers may include: emotional isolation causing frustration of dependency needs of others; bewilderment and aggressiveness may result. (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984, p. 24-25)

¹⁰ According to Argyris and Schön (1978) the organizational dialectic refers to organizational situations that give rise organizational inquiry--to problem setting and problem solving--which, in turn, create new organizational situations within which new inconsistencies and incongruities in organizational theory of action come into play. These are characteristically manifested in organizational conflict. The organization's way of responding to that conflict yields still further transformations of the organizational situation. (p. 42)

¹¹ Not using this jargon with the clients but rather surfacing the characteristics of the symbiotic lure in pointing out with puzzlement the "amazing level of agreement and similarity among them." At the right moments this would lead to more reflection on their part and a willingness to assume responsibility for denying their "true" differences and conflicts.

¹² Regressive action serves the defensive function of protecting individual organizational members from perceived annihilation (separation anxiety) by constructing unconscious fantasies of withdrawal into a safe and secure inner space--a space-in-time symbolized by the "holding environment" of infancy. (Diamond, 1993, p.6)

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