

From the organization-in-the-mind to the organization as subject: conceptual maps for psychoanalytic consultancy in institutions

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Abstract

Organizational consultancy has been using methods and approaches of psychoanalytic origin for several decades now, especially when the problems involved seem to imply significant emotional and inter-personal aspects, that leaders, key figures and often the involved subjects themselves appear mostly unaware of or visibly unwilling to know.

A considerable amount of literature is now available so that those who are interested in this subject can study it in further depth in its various aspects and its multiple applications. The aim of this article is rather an attempt to better specify the “object” of these professional practises, providing some conceptual maps and tools for guidance that can help consultants (but managers as well) from an analytical or psychotherapeutic background not to get lost in a *mare magnum* of theories and techniques where a number of specific risks are present alongside questionable improvisations and methodologies for every season. I am not referring so much to the various possible forms of narcissistic seduction or omnipotent vocations which can drag a consultant into disaster or into perverse collusion with a client, but rather to the danger of losing sight of the object of one’s own work, simplifying its complex nature, dealing more with the people than the processes (or vice versa), reifying the organization or anthropomorphizing it, losing the capacity to distinguish between fantasy and concrete reality; all this is a setting which the consultant cannot govern as he/she would with a psychotherapy and in a context made turbulent by the interests at stake and by the primitive (not to mention “psychotic”) quality of the anxieties around.

Before embarking on a similar conceptual journey, I would like to present a brief account taken from an experience of mine as a consultant, which I believe exemplifies how the understanding of these systemic anxieties and turbulences can help us recognize those aspects of the “hidden organization” (Perini, 2007) which generate suffering and malfunctioning.

Key words: Organizational consultancy, “organization in the mind”, institution, learning community, group.

1. An unpleasant story

This took place during an institutional supervision a few years ago for the Mental Health Centre of a large city, where an incident, which was not even that tragic or extraordinary, revealed in depth the contradictions, the unsaid, the conflicts and the shortcomings of the organization – we could say the institutional unconscious.

A patient with behaviour disorders came to the Mental Health Centre (CSM) late one afternoon just before closing time. Only a nurse and an educational worker were present but the patient demanded to speak with the doctor, who had already left: the

nurse explained this to him, perhaps in a slightly anxious and impatient way, and suggested he return the next day, making him an appointment; at that point the patient lost his temper and attacked her physically. The educational worker was in another room and apparently did not realize anything untoward was going on. The conflict blew over immediately and the patient, in a state of great anguish, left, almost running away; the nurse was not injured but she had been very frightened and the incident was followed by prolonged post-traumatic stress and great resentment towards the educational worker and the whole service.

The next meeting of the team rapidly became a “perfect storm”: they began to speak about the case and in the end everybody was quarrelling with everyone, the case remained unexplored and the meeting ended with intense malaise, without any possibility of gaining experience from it or making any decision.

The strong and anguished echo of this dispute flowed into the institutional supervision meeting that I have every month with the mental health service staff group. Here are some of the key phrases I heard:

“The doctors leave at 4 p.m. and it’s up to us to stand guard over the Bronx, maybe even leaving a woman on her own in the office”.

“Everyone knows the educational workers only do the clean jobs, they’re intellectuals...”

“What on earth do our colleagues do when they make home visits, just pay a courtesy call? That patient had been seen at home only two days earlier, how could they not have noticed anything?”

“The head doctor makes himself look good with the long hours [it was decided a month ago to extend the afternoon hours to 6 p.m.] but then we’re the ones that have to pay for it; three times this month I haven’t been able to close at 6 because clients turn up at the last moment and I can’t send them home without at least talking to them for a little while. So I get home after half-past seven and I end up quarrelling with my husband and children.”

“That’s right, you’re right, but how come it’s always you that has problems with the patients?”

These are emotional outbursts which are of course very common ways of releasing tension, there is nothing extraordinary about that, but they also reveal breaches in the hidden culture of the work organization and the relative unconscious fantasies. The first theory that is maintained is that of the clash of characters: the patient is stubborn, has a borderline personality disorder, is provocative and full of demands, but the nurse is deemed a person with an irritable character, who recently has appeared very tired and is also possibly on the way to burnout. However she does not accept this

“diagnosis”, refuses the “stigma” and attacks the whole system, so that precarious diplomatic balances collapse, with the results that I have already described.

During the supervisions, some obvious things emerge which seem to confirm the hypothesis (put forward timidly by a staff member) that the incident with the patient could be the symptom of an “ill organization”. The nurse really is a deeply frustrated person, but a non-marginal part of her frustrations seems objectively linked to the work organization, which according to her “has no respect for people’s private lives.” More than one staff members answered this statement with nods of assent.

Lengthening the afternoon opening hours of the Mental Health Centre, which had been decided a few weeks earlier together with an intensification of home care, actually seems to have disturbed the work/life balances of most of the staff to some extent, but until then nobody had brought this problem up. The decision, technically irreproachable and politically correct, had been made by the head doctor in agreement with the Director of the Mental Health Department to strengthen the local community care device and reduce recourse to admission to the hospital psychiatric ward. A slightly deeper analysis, however, allowed finding the following elements present “under the surface”:

1. The consent of the doctors and especially of the nurses on the change introduced had been acquired very hastily and without exploring any ambivalences or disagreements, which would nevertheless have been difficult to show on pain of risking taking on the role of “conservative” or worse, “saboteur”;
2. The extension of the opening times did not seem to be such a cogent need, in the light of the requirements of the service or the needs of clients, but it was explicitly perceived how narcissistically rewarding it was for the head doctor, not to mention the Director of the Department, to whom this was beneficial on both the political level (this decision was much appreciated by the General Manager) and the financial one (it was among the objectives on which his bonuses depended);
3. The argumentative words illustrated stereotypes and widespread prejudices, most of which undeclared, that certainly belonged to the local narration of the team (1), but which can actually be traced back to a series of identity tensions and conflicts of power operating at the level of the macrosystem, which opposed doctors and nurses, management and employees, healthcare and socio-educational professions, clinical cultures and political-administrative cultures.

If we add to this the fact that, in the face of this increased commitment, not only the staff had not been reinforced, but a couple of healthcare workers who had left the team (one on maternity leave and one had retired) had not been replaced, then it becomes possible to see the signs of the underlying institutional pathology: the organizational structure as a whole (management of the local health authority, strategic and department management, management of the Mental Health Centre and, fundamentally, the staff group as well) accepted and indeed, encouraged a diffused organizational culture of a manic type, i.e. based on idealization and denial, which

requires working more and better with the same means ("iso-resources", as it is termed today in bureaucratic language) or even with reduced resources.

The working hypothesis is that the traumatic incident brought out systemic anxieties and defences, implementing them locally and replicating isomorphically (cf. Kaës, 1976) at various levels the basic psychotic mechanism that acts as a matrix to delusion: if I do not like reality it can go to hell, I build one for my own use. In this way, the service had started to talk "delusionally" on the register of the salvific omnipotence and the narcissistic grandiosity, reacting to failures with victim blaming or reciprocal denigration. On her side, the nurse had developed a paranoid mental state construing for herself an identity as a victim, from which it would be difficult for her to emerge, because it was at least in part true (2) - she really had paid a high personal price for a persecutory organization – and also because she acted unconsciously as a mouthpiece for experiences of guilt and persecution fantasies which were present in other people as well and in the wider organization.

The event also questioned my role as a consultant and its structural ambiguity. As almost always, in this case too, the letter of appointment with which my work had been requested and financed spoke of "supervision" and "training", also because after the many violations that have by now taken place in the public administrations, consulting appointments were no longer allowed. In mental health services, supervision is traditionally a method to train operators for clinical team work and monitor the quality of the therapeutic-rehabilitation services. The method that I propose, on the other hand – and which I am explicitly asked for – is half-way between training and consultancy, of "clinical-organizational supervision", i.e. the opportunity to work together, supervisor and team, to maintain the caring role and the operative group: the aim is to help staff members work well, becoming aware of the emotional costs of the care task and therefore more capable of containing anxiety and preventing stress. Climbing on to Bion's shoulders, I like to say that the object of my consultancy is the "institutional container", but in this case, which of the many containers could be identified as the one needing care? The patient's mind? The nurse's mind? Both, as the reflection of a larger container that leaks or that is asked to do tasks greater than its forces? The group mind of the team or the real team of the Mental Health Centre as a container weakened by internal conflicts, projections and tribal schisms? The service and its optimistic culture of integration, which cannot or does not want to reckon with the anxieties raised by diversity, identity tensions, envies and rivalry around real and imaginary powers? The department, a bureaucratic entity which has never really been internalized by the staff (nor by the management, fundamentally) as the potential container of high differentiated professionalisms and of cooperative learning? Or the local health authority itself, with its top-down culture, indifferent or deaf to the reasons of the front line and therefore incapable of using its experience to ascertain the appropriateness and feasibility of its policies?

The case described above may raise further dilemmas that challenge a consultant to integrate with his or her competencies different and often contradictory, or even overtly conflicting aspects and perspectives. First of all, the individual-institution

relationship. To what extent the emerging problems could be considered personal, emotional, maybe character issues, or rather pertaining to group mechanisms, the type of work, or the organizational structure itself? Secondly, the basic conflict which is now poisoning our welfare system, so business-oriented and mainly focused on the political and financial costs: the conflict between clinical and managerial cultures, where the latter tends nowadays to prevail on the former, almost as if it wants to get even with a past when it was relegated to a subordinate and sometimes ancillary role. Finally, the ever unresolved dialectics between rational processes and emotional dynamics, which does not allow consultants to feel confident enough to locate the core issues (and suggested solutions) within the domain of mind and subjectivity or that of factual reality. Not to mention how complex and volatile appear the involved scenarios, which do not tolerate oversimplifying and linear logics, let alone resorting to models or guidelines.

All these questions map out a complicated territory, difficult to explore, and it is for this reason that as consultants we need clear and manageable conceptual maps. The first map that I would like to propose is lexical. What is an *organization*? Is it synonymous with *institution* or are there differences?

2. Organizations and institutions

After the Second World War, a distinction was proposed in sociology between institutions and organizations in order to differentiate the attitudes, the behaviour and the motivations between the members of the various social systems. The term organization designated the systems which had the sole aim of performing a defined task; their prototype was the company. Institutions represented those systems, such as the army, the Church, schools and the state itself, which had the explicit aim of generating meaning in the society and for the society to which they belonged. (Parri, 1995)

The first term has effectively entered the lexicon of business and the sociology of work and the corporation as a stable and typical term, whilst the second has ended up by belonging to the language of public administration, social policies and services for the person. Apart from belonging to different cultures, the two terms in practical use have gradually become assimilated with one another or are placed in a sequence as two stages in the founding state-specific process of a social system, which is therefore first “instituted” (with a law, a charter, etc.) and then “organized” (with a hierarchy, an organization chart, regulations, a system of procedures etc.). Unfortunately the result is a real Babel of languages and constructs, which I will try at least to transform into a descriptive picture.

According to Parsons, the leader of structural functionalism, the *institutions* deal with the social norms that bind individual behaviour in order to make it coherent with the ultimate shared values; sociology presents itself as the analytical study of institutional constraints on individual action oriented to guaranteeing that from the properties emerging from the systems of social action there is an integration of common values. The other two analytical social sciences, economics and political science, deal with further types of properties emerging from the systems of social action, those

concerning the aspects of the action which deal with the allocation of resources among alternative uses and those having to do with the aspects of the action governed by relations of coercion or power between individuals (Parri, *ibid.*).

On the other hand, social psychology tends at first to deal only with the *institutions*, usually leaving the organizations to the "business-oriented" disciplines; it conceives the institution as an indispensable necessity for human growth but, at the same time and paradoxically, also as an obstacle to this growth, and observes how since long time "the term Institution has been more and more acquiring the meaning of something that transcends individuals and dominates them" (Legramante, quoted by Varchetta, 1999). A more or less latent anti-institutional culture, moreover, has traditionally run through the whole of the history of social psychology since the end of the Second World War, from Goffman to Schatzman, from Illich to Basaglia to some tenacious prejudices which still influence the psychoanalytic movement. "In actual fact," Varchetta remarks, "the subject-institution dynamic should be triadically extended to the group, also underlining the group-institution dynamic: actually, individuals contribute to the formation of a group, just as the relations between groups contribute to the representation of the institution" (Varchetta, *ibid.*).

The sociology of industrial work, instead, concentrates on exploring the *organization* and considers it a form of cooperation between individuals, that is conscious, intentional and targeted, based on the coordination of elements which by being integrated with one another, contribute to the realization of an end. Olivetti Manoukian recalls that "at the beginning of the 1970s ... a definition of organization was frequently recalled as a 'place of settlement of conflicts.' In a slightly simplified way, it was already established a conceptual frame of reference that considered the organization as a social reality made up of individuals and groups bearing different and diverging interests. In the descriptions and analyses, reference was made above all to the factory and more in general to the industrial company, seen as the privileged context where conflicting tensions appeared and had to be tackled and in which opposition and conflicts of the wider society were reflected" (Olivetti Manoukian, 2004).

North (quoted by Parri, *ibid.*) states that organizations and institutions both substantiate the structure of human interaction, the former however correspond to the *players*, the latter to the *rules of the game*. The former are political parties, companies, state agencies, trade unions, employers' associations etc.; the latter are constitutions, legislations, statutes, regulations and any variety of formal and informal rules. The institutions influence the action of the organizations and the organizations act to change the institutions in a way favourable to them.

Selznick (*ibid.*) also distinguishes between institutions and organizations but as "different analytical approaches to the same empirical reality: a company can be studied as an institution (or 'natural organization') or as an organization ('rational organization')". Selznick's view is rather an *institutional approach to organizations* than an actual theory of institutions. Selznick writes, "The term 'organization' thus evokes something bare, a flat, sensible system of consciously determined activities. It refers to a tool that can be used, a rational instrument constructed to do a job. An

institution, on the other hand, is more similar to a natural product of the needs and social pressures, a reactive and adaptive body. This distinction is the result of an analysis, not of a direct description. It does not mean that a given enterprise has to be one thing or the other" (Selznick, 1957-1984).

The American school of neo-institutionalism, of which Selznick was one of the founders, essentially sees the institution as a complex of devices and legal norms through which the community controls the behaviour of individuals, whilst the organization is the social player established to reach specific objectives in the context of institutional constraints. Eggertsson, another representative of this school, expressed himself in similar terms: "Institutions are rules which through a system of rights and obligations designate the control of resources for individuals or for associations of people. Organizations are social groups, people who work together" (Eggertsson, 1996).

However, the psychoanalytic approach to the functioning of social systems has also challenged these concepts, structuring the distinction in various ways and in different contexts, at times contributing to new knowledge but in some cases producing confusion and ambiguity. For example Bleger, an Argentinian psychoanalyst who studied in depth the dynamics of groups and institutions – in particular the institutional dimension of the analytic setting – suggests a distinction of this kind: the organization is "the hierarchical arrangement of functions which generally take place in a building, in an area or in a delimited space," whilst the institution is a "set of norms, rules and activities grouped around social values and functions" (Bleger, 1970).

Enriquez – a central figure of French socio-analysis – at first gave the limited and precise meaning of "a structured ensemble that has to produce for a certain market a certain number of well-defined products or services and that has to ensure a certain degree of profitability" to the term 'organization', whilst he describes the institution as "what initiates, establishes, forms...", what sets up a way of social regulation and tends, for this purpose, "to keep and allow a state to continue ensuring the transmission of values and models of behaviour. Everyday language," he continues, "is not wrong when it qualifies the family, school and the army as institutions, i.e. groups that work out the founding laws, which issue regulations and communicate knowledge with the hallmark of truth and which have the vocation of 'bending', inclining the global mode of social relations in a given way" (Enriquez, 1990). In his book *L'Organisation en Analyse* Enriquez goes beyond the classic conception that describes organizations as "social and human systems" destined to produce goods and services and to manage crucial questions such as the bond, the decision, the power and control. Here the organization becomes a "cultural, symbolic and imaginary system", where unconscious fantasies, individual and collective desires and conscious projects cross paths, and which can be analysed on various levels:

- a) mythical
- b) historical-social
- c) institutional
- d) organizational (in the strict sense)

- e) group
 - f) individual
 - g) instinctual
- (Enriquez, 1992)

In a perspective more oriented towards “the clinical approach to the organization” the studies of the Tavistock Institute, by integrating the psychoanalytic and the systemic vertices, suggest another kind of distinction: by “organization” they mean the set of objective, concrete, rational and mainly conscious elements of any social organism, i.e. the human, financial, and technological resources, the venues, the personnel, the products, the roles, the procedures, the mission, the strategies, the management of authority and leadership, shortly, its organizational structure and culture. By “institution” on the other side they mean the complex of subjective and inter-subjective, fantasy-ridden, irrational and mainly unconscious aspects that represent the way an organization is experienced and conceived by the people and groups that, in any capacity, are part of or interact with it. These subjective aspects – that Armstrong (1997) and Hutton (2000) have called “organization-in-the-mind” – are made up of specific anxieties and related defences, as well as an emotional fabric including feelings, myths, narratives, fantasies, and internalized relationships (what is called *relatedness* in the language of the Tavistock Institute’s researchers.) These are actually pure mental contents, but that does not prevent them having the power to affect concrete behaviour, relationships between roles, work performance, and sometimes heavily conditioning the general policy and the fate of the organization itself.

By using a metaphor we could consider the actual organization as the hardware and the institution (that is, the organization-in-the-mind) as the software. Whereas the former operates in the social reality on the basis of an explicit agenda, the latter functions in the mind and includes a *hidden*, implicit and unexpressed, secret or even unconscious *agenda*. Once a given organizational strategy is established, having undergone all the required steps, that is, having gone through rational and thoughtful planning, having been assessed and acquired opinions and consensus from all the parts involved, having gained the authority, the guarantees, the resources and competencies to be translated into action, at the time of its realization one may suddenly discover that the strategy is not getting a general consensus, but in fact arouses widespread resistance and may even be sabotaged by the employees, the management, or even by the top of the organization that has conceived it. Thus, projects that at first seemed to be wished-for, shared, and realistic, happen to fail or are left unapplied. In other words, we may say that in such a case the “organization-in-the-mind” of the people involved moved in the opposite direction to what had consciously been stated and appeared as being the desired direction (Perini, 2007).

For the purposes of this paper, however, for the sake of convenience and simplification, I shall use the two terms synonymously.

3. Object, network, system, group, narrative, defence, body and mind: the many souls of the organization

In the perspective elaborated by Armstrong and in the Tavistock studies, the organization maintains its qualities as a vague and hard-to-be-deciphered entity, an internal and simultaneously an external reality, or a “bizarre object”, (3) to borrow Bion’s term.

In some respects, it has the “solid” properties of an *object* (wholeness, cohesion, identity, boundaries) and it seems appropriate to treat it as such; in other respects – and this is particularly true for the organizations of modernity – it dissolves in multiple parts that are more or less correlated, taking shape as a *network* structure, modulated in nodes and connections and without any stable or definite boundary. It works as a *system* based on the inter-dependency of its components (individuals, groups, resources) and on the balance between differentiation and integration.

The organization/institution has also been conceptualized as a peculiar *large group* (Volkan, 1997, 2004) or as a *system of groups* (Di Marco, 1999). By the way, both the institution and the group dimensions are a context of mediation or transition in the individual-society relationship, in that they reproduce within it the anxieties, the emotions and the power relationships in the society at any given historical moment. Thus, what tends to repeat or reproduce itself from one context to another is a dynamic situation of tension, a dialectic between opposing forces – like those that Castoriadis denominated “instituted” and “instituting” – whose precarious balance would be what is actually realized in the institutions (Castoriadis, 1975).

The “group” key in understanding and analysing the organizational processes derives mainly from three distinctive strands of research that unfortunately have not yet gained cross-fertilization, let alone a real synthesis:

1. Bion’s studies on groups (Bion, 1961), that have generated, around the concept of “basic assumption” and mostly the “work group”, a rich host of theories and applications both in the field of care institutions (in this respect the applications on Therapeutic Communities have been emblematic) and in the domain of companies and public administrations (where research by the Tavistock Institute stand out).
2. Kaës’ studies (4) on the unconscious processes in groups and institutions, concepts such as “narcissistic contract”, “denegative pact”, “unconscious alliance”, “group psychic apparatus”, “isomorphism”, and “suffering in institutional links” issued in the context of a bold and original exploration of the underworld of the group unconscious, offer new views on the less known and more troubling aspects of companies and their organizations. (Kaës, 1976, 2009; Kaës & al., 1987)
3. Pichon-Rivière’s conceptions about the “operational group” that have inspired illuminating research by Bleger and the Argentinian school of institutional analysis. (Pichon-Rivière, 1971; Bleger, 1966, 1970)

In Italy these trends have at least partly undergone a process of cross-fertilization, if not a synthesis. A variety of schools, associations and study circles on groups (5) have arisen. Their research has gone well beyond the dynamics of therapeutic groups and have explored the nature and functioning of institutional groups (Gaburri e Ruggi, 1998; Neri, 1995), care organizations (Napolitani, 1978, 1987; Fornari, 1976, 1978), the institutional field (Correale, 1991), social systems as “multi-layered sets) (Margherita, 2012), whereas other psychodynamically-oriented approaches (Pagliarani, 1977; Carli & Panizza, 1981) have explored the same terrain from a more psycho-sociological point of view.

Another approach to the organization aims to understand and grasp it as a *narrative*. The narrative is a form of articulating the speech that in communicating a knowledge or an experience chooses to tell the reality, instead of describing it in objective terms or representing it otherwise. In this way, it can convey not only information but also and mostly the emotions around that reality, integrating them in a “story” that can be interpreted as a myth (Bowles, 1989; Nicolle & Kaës, 2008; Zaleznik, 1989), like an image or a metaphor (Morgan, 1986; Cornelissen & al., 2005; Diamond, 2014) or more simply as a shared unconscious fantasy. The narrative approach – also known as *storytelling* (Gabriel, 2000, 2004) – is not only a way to handle institutional communication in terms of advertising, strategic marketing, brand management, etc., but it can also provide a new view of the organization, experiencing a more authentic and full version of it, including the split-off, denied, unsaid or unthought aspects.

Drawing on Klein’s theories and Bion’s new understanding of them, some scholars from the Tavistock Institute – in particular Elliott Jaques and Isabel Menzies – applied to the organization the psychoanalytic paradigm based on the anxiety/defence pair, conceptualizing human institutions as *defensive systems* that our society builds to manage some specific collective anxieties which are persecutory or depressive in nature. In this sense, institutions perform a major function of regulating the social relations and transmitting the necessary norms so that common life can occur. Jaques says that they convey security and protection in the face of the threat of chaos and madness looming over societies. The sophisticated theorizations on the nature and the functions of the “social defences” and their tendency to be incorporated in the fabric of the organization so as to match its culture and its structure, have thus been added to the classic Bionian theories – that gave the army the function of protecting society from paranoid anxieties linked to the fight/flight basic assumption, or the Church the task of managing dependence, associating it with an omnipotent entity to mitigate the fears of humankind about their own vulnerability (Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1961; Perini 2007).

An original and promising perspective was suggested by Richard Morgan Jones in his book *The Body of the Organisation and its Health*, where the organization is conceived as a *body* with organs and is supposedly subjected to similar processes as those in a living organism. Thus, its “health” is explored in relation to the health of the people who live and work inside it. This exploration, based on an approach that integrates psychoanalysis, group relations, and system theory, addresses the

experience from three different vertices – bodily, emotional, and societal – inter-related within a single matrix that is identified with Bion’s concept of “protomental” (Morgan-Jones, 2010).

This multi-dimensional look at organizational life opens up a new theoretical perspective that the author defines “socosomatic”. It extends the idea of “organization-in-the-mind” and includes in it that of “organization-under-the-skin”, owing some credit to Anzieu’s conceptions on the function of the skin as a psychic boundary (Anzieu, 1985). For the purposes of research and consultancy this perspective can be useful, because it is connected with the possibility of relating individual pathologies and collective malaise with the “sick” or “unhealthy” dynamics of a given system or the wider society. This is the case, for example, of “traumatized” communities and organizations that deal with traumas (both are to a different extent exposed to recycling them), or financial institutions, whose main task is to manage fear and greed and whose perverse effects are now obvious to everyone. Postulating healthy, unhealthy and sick organizations on the one hand opens up the possibility of “treating” them, i.e. first of all to manage them carefully and to prevent different forms of suffering and stress, and then to detoxify them from noxious emotions and morbid reactions that might have pervaded the culture and structure, compromising their climate, efficiency and, ultimately, even their *mission* and capacity to survive (Perini, 2013). On the other hand, it is the notion itself of organizational health that becomes a founding prerequisite for an *organizational clinical practice* (Schein, 1987; Forti & Varchetta, 1991; Di Marco & Nosé, 2008; Volkan, 1998). In re-proposing, within a systemic understanding, the psyche-soma unity, it can re-launch the idea of a trans-personal “organizational mind” which would not just manage the knowledge and elaborate rational strategies but would also operate as a container for unconscious emotions and fantasies, body sensations, instinctual drives and archaic relationships, a container that is ideally capable of containing them, so as to transform them.

In this sense, several psychoanalytically-oriented scholars have tried to “put the organizations on the couch” in order to identify their psychopathological characteristics that, starting from the “sick” behaviour of the leadership and the collusive bonds with the followership, seem to be able to render them unhealthy and dysfunctional. Full awareness about the risk of anthropomorphizing organizations by applying concepts and paradigms coming from the individual clinical practice has not dissuaded them from carrying out their explorations. So, Manfred Kets de Vries has thoroughly explored the “neurotic organization” (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984), whilst others have studied the degenerative effects of *corporate narcissism*, the narcissistic organization (Schwartz, 1990), the problems of “perverse organizations” (Long, 2008) and “psychotic” ones (Sievers, 2006), of “traumatized” and/or “traumagenic” organizations (Volkan, 2003; Hopper, 2012), all making important contributions to the theory and the practice of both management and consultancy.

However, if we accept the concept of “organizational mind” as a plausible and useful one, we have to acknowledge that another pathology – much more devious and with a much higher incidence – can strike this mind: a real “learning disorder”, that is to

say, the inability to learn from experience. The concept of *learning organization*, an organization that is able to learn, was introduced by Peter Senge and developed by Chris Argyris to describe some of the conditions that enable an organization to deal with change and to thrive. Some examples of these conditions can be a culture that encourages learning through experience, critical thought and innovative ideas, accepting risks and mistakes, the promotion of a working community among the employees (Senge, 1990; Argyris & Schon, 1996).

The obstacles that may impair this learning ability can be numerous and operate at different levels, but if we want to represent the organization as a mind, I will mention only two valuable concepts by Bion – the attack on linking and the hatred of knowledge (-K), that in my opinion lend themselves best to describe those processes of sabotaging experience that tend to be activated in the individual, in the group and in the organization (Bion, 1962, 1970).

After this overview of a variety of theoretical approaches that privilege one of the different perspectives from which an organization can be observed and represented, I would now like to further explore the *institution-in-the-mind* construct I mentioned earlier to try to shift the emphasis from a conception of the organization as an object of study and intervention to an approach that views it rather as a subject, that is, as a social agent, a client, and an active interlocutor in the relationship with the researcher or the consultant.

4. The organization-in-the-mind

From a traditional psychoanalytic perspective, the term would not deserve much attention: after all, each social institution, just as any other external object of real life, can be internalized by the ego and become an “inner object”, one of the many mental objects of the individual. Actually, things are not so simple. First, the organization – if we think of it as a dynamic system – is not such a well-defined object, a place with stable and visible boundaries, but rather a “field” of functions (Correale, 1991) and complex inter-dependences involving different internal and external objects within a mobile and ever-changing network, as well as multiple selves, part objects and individual and group self-objects (matrices of identity, role and belonging), the mutual internalized relationships, specific “social” anxieties and defences (Menziés, 1988), “ego” components such as the work group (Bion, 1961) or the managerial leadership. Yet, besides all these components, the institutional field also includes a variety of “third” elements – power, task, hierarchy, money, work, rules and procedures – that break in from the outside without almost ever being introjected as regulating super-ego agencies, but rather as an internal persecutor that imposes a culture of subjugation or a sadistic inspector that establishes the primacy of the profits and results.

Having said this, and also to escape the Babel of terminology, it can be useful to re-locate this construct within the context that has generated it: the Tavistock tradition, the systems-psychodynamic paradigm and the Group Relations experience. The word “organization-in-the-mind” was apparently introduced for the first time by Pierre Turquet, a psychoanalyst, in relation to his own experience as a staff member in a

Group Relations Conference, one of the classic residential experiential seminars created by the Tavistock Institute to study group relations within organizational systems (Miller, 1989, Perini, 2014). Turquet did not explore the concept any further. It was examined closely by other researchers, also because of its use in consultancy work with teams, public institutions and companies.

Shapiro and Carr, for example, say that

[any] organization is composed of the diverse fantasies and projections of its members. Everyone who is aware of an organization, whether a member of it or not, has a mental image of how it works. Though these diverse ideas are not often consciously negotiated or agreed upon among the participants, they exist. In this sense, all institutions exist in the mind, and it is in interaction with these in-the-mind entities that we live (Shapiro e Carr, 1991, pp.69-70)

A significant contribution to clarifying the concept is by Hutton, Bazalgette and Reed:

‘Organisation-in-the-mind’ is what the individual perceives in his or her head of how activities and relations are organised, structured and connected internally. It is a model internal to oneself, part of one’s inner world, relying upon the inner experiences of my interactions, relations and the activities I engage in, which give rise to images, emotions, values and responses in me, which may consequently be influencing my own management and leadership, positively or adversely. (...) ‘Organisation-in-the-mind’ helps me look beyond the normative assessments of organisational issues and activity, to become alert to my inner experiences and give richer meaning to what is happening to me and around me (Hutton, Bazalgette e Reed, 1997, p. 114)

Referring to Bion’s studies and the Tavistock tradition, David Armstrong further explores the concept of the organization-in-the-mind along the line of his original thought to define and explore the theoretical and clinical foundation of what he calls “the proper object of a psychoanalytic approach to working with organizations” (Armstrong, 2005). He observes that in practising clinical psychoanalysis, things are easier and more transparent, as “... the ‘object’, as it were, is there in the room”, explicitated within the transference and countertransference processes. “But”, Armstrong continues, “in working with, say, an individual executive during a role consultation, in what sense is the ‘object’ there; or, to put this another way, just what is the ‘object’ you are seeking to work with?” (ibid., pp. 2-3).

Although Armstrong accepts many theories of the authors mentioned above, he anyway wonders “whether these internal models, images, or fantasies located in the individual, might rather be a response [by the individuals and groups] to something more primary that was a property of the organization as a whole, something that was intrinsic to the organization as one socio-psychic field. From this perspective, each individual’s internal model or constructs, conscious or unconscious, might perhaps better be seen as a secondary formation, a particular, more or less idiosyncratic, response to a common, shared organizational dynamic.” (ibid., pp. 4-5) Similarly, he suggests considering the projective processes at work in the organization not only – or not so much – as something that the organization suffers passively from and

becomes the target of, but rather in response to something that it has aroused in the people and the groups that live and work inside the organization.

On this basis, Armstrong formulates – perhaps “somewhat presumptuously”, as he comes to observe himself – a number of propositions to define the *proper object of the psychoanalytic approach to organizations*:

- a) The proper object of a psychoanalytic approach to working with organizations is attention to and interpretation of emotional experience, in the meeting between a consultant and a client.
- b) The client can be an individual, a group, a team, or conceivably the total membership of the organization. (6)
- c) Emotional experience is not, or is not just, the property of the individual alone ... [but] is always, or always contains, a factor of the emotional experience of the organization as a whole (...)
- d) The emotional experience of the organization as a whole is a function of the interrelations between task, structure and context (or environment). Members contribute individually to this experience according to their personality structure. They also contribute anonymously in “basic-assumption” (7) activity. At the same time, you could say they *are contributed to* – that is, there is a resonance in them of the emotional experience of the organization..., both conscious and unconscious.
- e) This resonance has a particular register in each member... determined by the position and role that each member takes within the organizational structure as a whole and the boundary that role relates to... [as well as] the emotional undertow of transactions across that boundary.
- f) (...) The “organization-in-the-mind”... [is] the proper object of a psychoanalytic approach to working with organizations. [It is] to be understood literally and not just metaphorically. It does not (only) refer to the client’s conscious or unconscious mental constructs of the organization: the assumptions he or she makes about aim, task, authority, power, accountability, and so on. It refers also to the emotional resonances, registered and present in the mind of the client. (8)
- g) What a psychoanalytic approach to working with organizations does it to disclose and discern the inner world of the organization in the inner world of the client. This “world-within-a-world” can appear as a foreign body, as an extension of the individual, or as a term in the relatedness of the individual to his, her, or their context. It can be denied, disowned, defended against, and so on.
- h) The aim of a psychoanalytic approach to working with organizations is to introduce the client to this world-within-a-world. Introducing the client to this world-within-a-world promotes the development in the relatedness of the client to the organization [which in turn] *makes a difference*... to the inner world of the organization.

- i) Everything that takes place in this setting is seen in relation to the assumption or hypothesis of the experiential reality of the “organization-in-the-mind”, as a term in the relatedness of a person-in-role to the system – that is, everything, however personally it is presented, is taken as potential evidence of this reality. (...) (Armstrong, 2005, pp. 5-8)

In this respect, I could mention as an example the known situations of “interpretative obsession” that occur fairly frequently in the mental health services, even in those where no psychoanalysts work. In such contexts, where everything tends to be interpreted – sometimes even in appropriate psychodynamic terms –, where every oversight is a parapraxis, every criticism is an envious attack, every hesitation is an ambivalence, an organizational climate, that is dominated by the culture of suspicion, control and intolerance for the uncertainty, is often to be found. It is a culture that is expressed in a common emotional atmosphere but ends up modelling the architecture of the service, that is, its procedures, roles, authority structures, decision-making processes and management mechanisms, that in turn shape the organizational behaviours of everyone – bosses, workers and clients. At that point we could hypothesize that an obsessive-paranoid organization-in-the-mind, generated by the personality of the leader in collusion with the anxieties of the bottom and the wider social context have taken control of the actual organization and have transformed it isomorphically into their *doppelganger*. But at the same time, we can assume that the same organization-in-the-mind was already reactive to ill-functioning, conflicts and malaise that belonged primarily to that service, to its structural weaknesses or feebleness associated with its social status, to the ambiguities of its task or mandate, to the conscious or unconscious pervasive anxieties related to the expected results and the feared risks.

In other words, we could say that the organization-in-the-mind and the actual organization are the two polarities of a bi-directional flow of projections that, as sometimes occurs between staff members and patients (Main), transforms one into the creature of the other. So, both seem not to be like just objects but, at least in part, like subjects.

5. Conclusion: From the organization as an object to the organization as a subject

The aim of my paper is to contribute to “re-subjectify” the notion of organization, clearing the ground from the late-Enlightenment (or neo-Taylorist) illusion that a human production can be studied and understood in purely objective and rational terms, disregarding not only the role of history and culture, but also and foremost the personal and subjective dimension that has taken part in its construction and is in charge of its use and functioning. Terms like “organizational life”, “juridical person”, “corporation”, “collapses of the markets”, “bank suffering”, etc., testify by the weight of their metaphorical roots how deeply organizational culture is in debt, with its language and its semantic field, to the human being and human vicissitudes.

The theories formulated by Armstrong already shift the focus of the discourse from the idea of the organization as an “object” – of study, consultancy, management – to the idea that the actual object of the work of a consultant is rather the emotional experience that people have of their organization – individuals as well as groups, consultants as well as clients, leaders as well as followers. Thus, the object is the person-organization relationship (or rather, the person-role-organization relationship) which, even when asymmetrical, is two-way and inter-subjective by definition.

Even before the so-called “relational turn”, psychoanalysis has always dealt with the subjects – after all, what psychoanalysis calls an “object” cannot be objectified, as it is a living subject, capable of thinking, feeling emotions, experiencing and relating to the other. Even in Freud’s drive theory (Freud, 1916-17) one could already find the premises of the primacy of the subject. Along with the conception of the object as a simple means to satisfy the aims of the drive or to discharge the tension, the idea of a “love object” started to appear as the repository and active interlocutor in a more mature and mutual relationship.

As Guntrip – the founder of the psychoanalytic approach known as “object relations theory” – explained, the objects in which psychoanalysis is interested have the potential to be, and actually are, subjects capable of experiencing, unlike the objects of natural and social sciences (biology, neurology, behaviourism, sociology, economics, etc.), that cannot become subjects, and even if they are such, this aspect is disregarded or considered unimportant.

There is an element of objectivity in every kind of study and relationship, but I would prefer to sum the matter up thus: *Psychodynamics studies its objects basically as ‘subjects’, while traditional science studies whatever it does study as ‘objects only’. It is this exclusively objective approach of classical science that fails to do justice to ‘persons’ as ‘subjects of experience’. Psychodynamic studies pose a genuinely new problem for science, which cannot be handled by the classic scientific methods of investigation and conceptualization.* (Guntrip, 1969, p. 373)

This is the remarkable contribution that a psychoanalytic approach can give to organizational consultancy, i.e. re-discovering the organization as a subject, as a *living learning community* of people one can relate to at different levels, exploring each of them with the most appropriate techniques. In the first contacts with the client organization, for example, a consultant can use the initial interview and the following negotiation meetings to also carry out a preliminary observation of the organizational dynamics, resistances, and any underlying problems. The way an organization presents itself, the appearance of its façade and its entrance hall, the person contacting the consultant and the person welcoming him/her (and how and by what role authority) in the first meeting, what is said and what is left unsaid, how long the consultant waits or how many procedural constraints there are before he/she is able to start the consultancy work or to ask for information, how the issues concerning time and money are dealt with, etc. These processes can be observed from the very start by

the consultant with techniques similar to those used in *infant observation* (Hinshelwood & Skogstad, 2000) together with an exploration of one's own countertransference responses to what one has observed, the different "institutional transferences" that are addressed to the consultant and the projective flows he/she is involved in during the work. The ability to understand the systemic processes as well can enable the consultant to interpret the emotional experiences that will occur in the dialogue with a manager or a team, being the expression of hidden or denied issues, or ways to access the shadow zones in the organization, of which the individuals have been the unconscious spokespeople (Perini, 2007).

In this sense, the organization becomes a subject, as it talks, thinks, feels and acts by means of its members, according to the rules it sets, the results it gets, the (economic, social and especially emotional) costs it imposes on the people that interact with it, the myths and narratives that it feeds within itself and its surroundings.

After all, organizations are conceived and formed by people for people, are managed by people, and use people to achieve their goals, in the same way as people also use organizations to achieve their own goals. Thus, they are "human technologies", so to speak, and not simple anthropic machines. They are living organisms that, like human beings, are endowed with a psyche and a body. They have ideas, affects, dreams, and plans, in other words, they have a personality. They make connections to cooperate, they attack each other to compete and pair up to generate something new; they go through life and development cycles so that they come to light, grow, decline, get ill and die.

So who, then, can understand this personal and subjective dimension better than a "clinician"?

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Notes

- (1) The nurses appeared not infrequently in a condition of “latent revolt” and openly demanding autonomies and recognitions that in part they already had and in part seemed fetishist desires based on the omnipotent fantasy of being able to cope on their own and better without the doctors (“for what they’re for, they’re never here”). The latter were often absent, in the sense that they were psychically not very present or protected themselves from the tensions with tactics of avoidance and elusion.
- (2) As Berke has shown, “even paranoids have enemies” (Berke, 1998).
- (3) According to Bion, in the phantasy each “particle” that has been split and rejected from the ego keeps on having its autonomous life outside the personality and is perceived as a bizarre object, that is, something made up of a real external object incorporated inside a fragment of the personality that overwhelms it (Bion, 1967).
- (4) To give a complete picture, we need to clarify that the findings by René Kaës are part of a rich explorative trend inaugurated by Anzieu’s studies on groups and carried out by the so-called “French school” of group and institutional psychoanalysis, that besides Kaës also includes among others Rouchy, Roussillon, Enriquez and other scholars who came together around the journal *Connexions*, the Association pour la Recherche et l’Intervention Psychosociologiques (ARIP) and the Cercle d’Études Françaises pour la Formation et la Recherche: Approche Psychanalytique du groupe, du psychodrame et de l’Institution (CEFFRAP).

- (5) For example, the Istituto Italiano di Psicoanalisi di Gruppo (IIPG), heir of the Centro Ricerche Psicoanalisi di Gruppo in Rome, known as Pollaiolo's, and the one in Palermo, the CORAIG with its component societies, the SGAI, ARGO with its journal *Funzionegamma*, etc.
- (6) Actually, it is not always easy to identify or define the “client”. The client can be a member of the organization, a manager, a key figure, a team, a whole sector or department, the executive managers of the company, its ownership, the organization as a whole, but also the users/consumers or their entourage and representative bodies, the stakeholders (carriers of interest), the shareholders, the community. The clients can also be more than one and they are frequently in conflict of interest.
- (7) Bion, 1961.
- (8) It is what Larry Hirschhorn describes with the term “workplace within” (Hirschhorn, 1988).

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