

Organizational Empowerment and Systems Psychodynamics

A historical review with relevance to organizations
in a postmodern era

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System Psychodynamics (which in turn became Systems Psychodynamics) had its first print mention in the Tavistock Institute's 1992/93 Review. Although it would seem like a new discipline it would be more accurate to see it as a practical combination of three influences, the practice of psychoanalysis, group relations theory, and systems theory in the study of group and organizational processes. This paper reflects back on the history and emergence of this discipline with reference to its foundational roots. The intent of this research is to show the relevance of systems psychodynamics to organizations today by revealing the similarities of context and issues between its historical influences and those of the postmodern day.

Historians, economists, futurists, and scenario planners can help us recognize with conviction that history always repeats itself. We may never live the same day twice, however patterns that influence different eras can be understood to be cyclical and in some aspects predictive. With much conversation about change and technological advancement in society we can easily be misled to think that nothing like this has ever happened before. The late 19th and early 20th century period may have similar threads however with continual advances in science, medicine, and technology. Each of these fields may be further progressed in our day but it is not unreasonable to think about how they were disrupting the conservative Victorian era in a manner similar to how recent advancements are shaking up the modern corporate constructs and calling for similar needs.

Sigmund Freud emerged in the midst of this conservative and scientific era with a different view on the world. Coming from a blended family and growing up in an anti-Semitic environment he had a unique voice and methodology. His predecessors in psychology had avoided dealing with some of the conscious and the unconscious mind as it did not fit into how many perceived science in their day. His creation of psychoanalysis however seemed to touch a cord within society and opened up the doors for psychology to be something that had relevance to the general public. He shifted gears within psychology and opened it up to be something that could take the learning and discoveries in research into an applied science with the promise of healing for its participants. He was a rebel within a conservative scientific culture and dealt with some of the taboo emotional aspects that lay deep below the surface.

Systems Psychodynamics, finding some of its roots in psychoanalysis, deals with many of the taboo emotional aspects that lie deep below the surface within organizations. The word taboo is used here to highlight how often emotions and fears are ignored, discounted or controlled within organizations today. Corporate conservatism often downplays the role of emotions and focuses on other scientific methods to manage organizations in a similar way to how the conservative culture in Freud's day downplayed individual emotions. The emergence of systems psychodynamics and its methodologies however is opening up the doors within organizations to acknowledge the more human relational aspect of systems.

The late 19th century environment needed something more from psychology and as a result gave birth to Psychoanalysis in Sigmund Freud. If the flux of the late Victorian era mirrors much of the postmodern shift of society it would stand to reason that the recent appreciation of systems psychodynamics is due to a growing awareness of a need for psychology to play a more significant role within organizational development. The relational dynamics of organizations today is calling for a greater emotional intelligence among leaders and managers. The old ways of the past are not enough anymore to navigate a collective group of people through change. The more leaders and managers can gain an awareness about themselves and their environment the greater chance they will have of succeeding to develop ways in which to process the emotions of a group that can lead to a healthier organization and its long term success.

The second main influence of systems psychodynamics is that of group relations. The study of group relations developed through the First World War as mental health issues among soldiers was recognized. Working with groups became a necessity due to the expense of working with individuals and in addition the patterns of working with individuals pointed towards the need for understanding the dynamics of a group as a holistic system. Le Bon and McDougall introduced the idea of working with the group as a whole which was focused on studying the behavior of a "group as a social system and the individuals' relatedness to that system." (Wells, 1985, p.112). This work by no means discounted the work with individuals but instead rooted that work in a specific context and culture.

Mental health problems today have by no means waned and investigating organizations as a whole has become an important aspect of study to discover how groups and cultures create or relieve such issues. Many within the corporate world have either experienced or heard of people getting fired because of reduced performance or a degrading attitude. As much as these are complex issues there is a greater need for corporate awareness and responsibility when it comes to leadership and culture and their influence on these results. The relevance of understanding the group as a social system today is paramount within corporations, especially in light of the emergence of global companies. Researching to understand the motivational contributors and relational dynamics of many successful companies is of significant interest to organizations which can be recognized by the plethora of books under these topics in the local bookstore.

The third remaining contributor to systems psychodynamics is that of systems theory and specifically the aspect of open systems and boundary awareness. Although seeds of systems theory can be found throughout history its modern emergence came around the time of the Second World War as boundary awareness became important when considering the rebuilding of society. The paradox between understanding social systems as defenses against anxiety and recognizing the necessity for an open system between countries in a shared future gave way for a new depth of study and discovery.

The relevance of systems theory and boundary awareness for corporations today has become very recognizable especially when it comes to ecology. An organization exists to not only take from its environment but to give also in a conservationist mentality. Long term planners in corporations today are becoming more successful in communicating the win/win of a permeable boundary for an organization. Many are now aware that if they remain too closed they will be short lived and others are becoming aware that if they are too open they will lack an identity strong enough to navigate the chaos and find meaning in their contribution. These boundaries are also important when it comes to the emotions within an organization. If too closed there is no room to acknowledge anxiety and if too open anxieties can go unprotected. The need to understand more from systems theory in this postmodern era is vital as we recreate ourselves in the hope of a healthy future.

Systems psychodynamics is not merely the application of the three main influences above but is rather a combination of all three that has led to a unique discipline in itself. According to Neumann (p.57) systems psychodynamics is a term used to refer to the collective psychological behavior within an organization. An organization can be a group that is intentionally organized or a more ad hoc group that has structured itself in some form. Whichever type of organization or group systems psychodynamics appreciates the whole as something more than the sum of its parts and can be analyzed from within or without to recognize how psychological behavior and emotions are regulated.

Although Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis was not developed with application to groups, his work has provided the theoretical foundation for systems psychodynamics. Melanie Klein (1946) building upon Freud's work, developed object relations theory which described how people learn to cope with unpleasant emotions from an early age. She theorized that a child would split the mother into two objects or beings to deal with the confusion of nurture and satisfaction (of her breast). This gave a child the capacity to see the giving nurturing mother as good and the withholding frustrating mother as bad. This paranoid-schizoid position and splitting defense, she argued, allowed a child to embrace the good emotions while learning to distance themselves from the destructive emotions, disowning the uncomfortable feelings and projecting them onto someone else. Klein proposed that beyond the paranoid-schizoid stage came a distinct yet overlapping stage called the depressive position. This is when a child matures and attempts to reconcile the good and the bad objects and moves on to acknowledge them as whole beings with good and bad parts. Wilfred Bion took Klein's work and moved it beyond the study of children and into the realm of adult behavior within groups. Bion's work (along with others known then as the Tavistock Group) took its footings as it came at a time when the British military were struggling with manpower issues in the midst of the Second World War. The desperate need to get rehabilitated soldiers reengaged back in the battlefield created openness for something new as other methods had not delivered the necessary results. Bion and others recognized this opportunity and had their method welcomed by volunteering themselves in the war effort.

Bion's work was nothing short of pioneering in this time of war. He established what he called a therapeutic community which engaged the entire hospital as a therapeutically engaged social system. This shifted the focus from treating individual patients to a group-based treatment and practice. This systemic paradigm included all aspects of leadership, social participation, education, and rehabilitation. This not only captured the entire hospital to work as one within the context of a community but redefined leadership as something that came from internal group analysis instead of something that came from the outside.

After the war the Tavistock clinic (as it became known) was forced to redefine itself in order to exist. The needs of the war had been the catalyst for the development of the clinic and its group practice and its success led to the incorporation of the Tavistock Institute for the study of wider social problems in 1946. Its work was defined within the mental health profession with an approach and orientation towards the social sciences as part of the National Health Service. Beyond England, Lewin and the National Training Laboratory (NTL) in America also developed the field of group relations and the two organizations continued to extend study and research that paved the way for systems psychodynamics.

According to Trist (1985, p.30), Bion's style made it safe for a group to "dramatize its unconscious situation". This feeling of security that he was able to elicit from a group allowed him to develop the "outsider within" perspective. This perspective allowed him to be the measuring instrument within a group where he extended his work by using the psychoanalytical concepts of transference and counter-transference. He was able to study the reactions, defenses and emotions of a specific group by allowing himself to be available for a group to disown their uncomfortable feelings and project them onto him, leading to a means wherewith he could understand the group's unconscious behavior.

Bion went beyond Freud's and Klein's theories by exploring them within group membership only to discover that some of the same confusion and contradictory feelings experienced by a child with its mother are reflected in group development. He used Klein's object relations theory to show how experiences within groups trigger "primitive fantasies whose origins lie in the earliest stages

of life” (Gabriel, 1999, p.118). This highlights the complexity of group relations and behavior within an organization as every member is drawing from their past experiences to manage their emotions within a specific group. Bion’s theories therefore on unconscious and covert group dynamics is vital to understanding organizations and their natural cultural defenses.

The importance of the contribution of psychoanalysis in systems psychodynamics can be recognized when considering organizational empowerment. Empowerment has been a buzz word within organizations over the last few decades, however the focus of the efforts are too often focused at an individual level. According to Zimmerman (2004), Organizational Empowerment (OE) is necessary to move beyond the common individual bias. He explains this individual bias as the tendency to reduce complex person-in-environment phenomena to individual dynamics. By ignoring OE and only focusing on individual dynamics many interventions fail and individuals are perceived as solely responsible for the outcomes without any appreciation of environmental and contextual issues. Consultants and trainers who lack the knowledge and appreciation of systems psychodynamics tend to overemphasize the ability of a leader or team member to know all the possible issues that shape their decisions. This mechanistic advice and practice has unfortunately led many organizations into distress and feelings of incompetency instead of the desired outcome of success with a feeling of empowerment. In contrast, organizational consultants with knowledge and experience in systems psychodynamics look at the whole system, the people, the structures, the challenges and the desired outcomes and intervene in the emotions and emotionality of organizational life to find ways to strengthen the system to learn and become more responsive in a manner where more feel empowered. Empowerment is a feeling yet many attempt to make people feel this way by giving away more work and authority. Few stand back to consider that a more empowered workforce will necessitate a complexity beyond one model and that the feeling and need for empowerment is different with every individual. Freud, Klein and Bion’s work helps us to recognize that groups are living, learning and dynamic and only when approached in this manner will greater organizational health and performance be achieved over the long-haul.

The history of group-as-a-whole thinking can be traced back to 1896 when Gustave Le Bon, a French sociologist, published “The Crowd”. His book highlighted a theory about large unorganized

groups where a person sacrifices a part of his or her individuality upon joining. He emphasized how a person becomes more easily influenced and susceptible to suggestion. According to Le Bon (1896), "An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will" (p.33). The wind to Le Bon could be any dominant force that exerted its authority, a charismatic leader for example, who could coerce the group mind in a hypnotic manner. Le Bon faced much critique among some of his peers who considered his theories negative towards group behavior. Kraskovic highlighted the aspect that a group is not only subject to authority but also contained the capacity to succeed or fail within itself. The British born American, William McDougall (1920) expanded Le Bon's work by agreeing upon its wild nature while emphasizing its capacity, under the right circumstances, to gain a high level of synergy and success.

McDougall's work emphasizes the great capacities of a self-managing team yet also highlights that leading in this structure is difficult and rarely done well. The benefit of systems psychodynamics is important therefore when it comes to considering self-managing teams. It becomes of vital importance to understand that there is not one preferred structure of relationships within organizations today. The need to describe the operational nature and the context of an organization including the industry it is within is significant to discover the style and structure that is necessary for a team to perform well. Highly creative software developers for instance may work best within a self-managing environment whereas a highly efficient manufacturing plant may become overburdened and stressed in this environment. An overall understanding of a groups needs and the company's objectives combined is therefore necessary to discover an effective organizational structure that can draw out the best from its staff.

Kurt Lewin, after fleeing Nazi Germany for the United States in 1932, contributed to systems psychodynamics by providing a way for the tension between the individual and the group to be studied. His work showed that the group is much more than the sum of its parts with his philosophy that "the group to which an individual belongs is the ground for his perceptions, his feelings, and his actions" (Lewin, 1948, P.vii). Lewin took field theory, which until his time was only within the realm of physics, and gave it application within the social sciences. He used the knowledge of field theory within physics to demystify the nature of group life by comparing the nature and make-up

of molecules as similar to the nature and make-up of groups and organizations. He showed that both have sub-groups and individual properties of which they are composed yet as they stand they are unique entities. This eventually led to a discovery that adults learn more effectively through interactive experiences shared in experiential learning environments rather than traditional lectures and seminars.

Organizational learning is a very important part of the study and contribution of systems psychodynamics. The Tavistock Institute and others have developed group relations conferences to strengthen the capacities of organizations. The learning outcomes are not prescribed like in other styles of education but are instead self-directed. The importance of the learning is not to walk away knowing one more fact but instead to leave knowing one more thing that was important to learn for a specific person in context with the group in which they work. The benefit being that this strengthens the interaction and intuition of the group as a whole. These off-site experiences help each person explore their behaviors, anxieties, and defenses which come to play in their normal team activities. The intended outcome of the entire experience is that a team of people can over time develop a natural learning community whose members experience a feeling of well-being and find it safe to be open and non-defensive with a capacity to communicate and negotiate with one another and the wider system more effectively.

Beyond off-site group experiences systems psychodynamic theorists work with the power structures and feedback loops for communication within organizations to enhance learning opportunities. The outcome of a learning organization therefore is one that has the capacity to change and develop through systemic feedback and interpersonal relations. This comes as a result of appreciating group defenses, cultural requirements, environmental needs, customer requests, and other emotional dynamics. Systemic learning recognizes the links between emotion and organizational politics. Instead of ignoring the uncomfortable knowledge that comes within politics there are systems in place to process and learn from this knowledge in safe environments. Organizations that learn to embrace the benefit of systems psychodynamics learn to embrace that emotions are an important part of their culture. Instead of fearing and controlling emotions they are perceived as feedback where the whole can be developed in place of someone being scapegoated.

The systems approach to organizations was developed after the discoveries of the Tavistock Institute in the Second World War by researchers who sought to apply the discoveries into nonmilitary problems within society. The examination of unconscious group processes and how they shape society and the institutions within it led to an understanding of social systems as defenses against anxiety. Tavistock Institute staff members Elliott Jaques (1952) and Isabel Menzies (1960) researched to show how organizations develop mechanisms to defend against anxiety inherent within the system. They showed that these mechanisms can either fan the flame or relieve these anxieties pointing to the need to understand these at a deeper level. Effective mechanisms can help members deal with disturbing emotional experiences while others can lead members to emotionally disengage. The complexity lies however in the fact that these mechanisms get built into how an organization works over time and the transient nature of business today means that new employees may struggle in certain environments yet not know why.

Anxieties are exposed in times of change. This is when boundaries are ruptured within organizations. These times include mergers, acquisitions, reengineering efforts, or the loss of a major client. Quite often the changes are acted upon by executives and board with noble intentions. The outplay and success of these efforts however are not often handled well and can significantly effect the long term health of an organization. In major change senior leadership often forgets about how boundaries and interaction will change. The unknowns of role and authority among staff and teams lead to more anxiety and as a result more reactive and defensive behavior among individuals and certain divisions that reflect back to earlier experiences. Taking the time to understand the relationship between the individual and the work group, the work group and the organization, and the organization and its environment becomes vital to success in times like this. The active participation of all groups in cross-functional communication can open the organization up to greater learning and potential success when considering major change. The difficulty of this however in a society where mergers and acquisitions must be kept secret until officially announced leans to strong and effective, emotionally intelligent leadership.

In conclusion, organizations whether structured or unstructured are a gathering of people to serve a specific purpose. They have different life spans which is dependant upon their contribution

to society and their effectiveness. An organization is much more than the sum of its parts and in many aspects has a life all of its own. It can be understood more effectively when studied as a whole and can be nurtured to greater health and contribution when its identity and boundaries are clear and appreciated by the members. Thanks to the historical contributions of psychoanalysis, group relations, and systems theory, systems psychodynamics theory is positioned to assist the complex organizations of our day to understand themselves better and have the support needed to navigate the constant change needed to survive. The history and development of systems psychodynamics has by no means ended and no doubt many more attributes of its three main influences will be rediscovered and applied in a systemic manner to benefit the postmodern era. History may repeat itself but while it continues to have regard and respect for these historical discoveries organizations will not have to reinvent the wheel to move forward.

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