

HOLDING PATTERNS: A PSYCHODYNAMIC REVIEW OF THE DEATH INSTINCT IN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Detachment from idealized truths creates separation anxiety and erodes self-concept to such a degree that feelings of identity dissolution or mortality and death are aroused and self-fulfilling prophecies of only negative change consequences surface. Mortality and death frame life itself, yet this 'frame' is hidden in our unconscious. However, when allowed to emerge, it becomes a significant influence upon workplace behavior because during organizational change, the inability to sustain holding of our worldviews can invoke death instinct manifestations that are generally harmful to the self and others.

Psychodynamic Theorizing On The Death Instinct

Instinct theory is apposite psychological and behavioral interpretation as it makes a “constant claim on the mind and urges the individual to take certain actions” [1, p. 58]. In Sigmund Freud’s [2] [3] composite view of pleasure maximization and displeasure minimization, *Eros* is a *class of instincts* comprised of life (sex/libido) and self-preservation and the death instinct class, *Thanatos* is embodied by purely destructive behaviors [3] [4] [5] [6]. Through identification, wanted superego aspects from the outside world are introjected by the ego or conscious to form an ego ideal: a unique set of optimal values representing the best accepted standards for living life as derived from aspects of authority figures’ (e.g. parents; supervisors) mental models. To protect the derived worldview, the ego uses judgment, logic and memory to satisfy, postpone, or repress *Eros*’ and *Thanatos*’ emanations from the id or unconscious to the extent that neither does harm to the self nor others in society and so are culturally shaped. During synchronistic failure to meet competing idealized goals, *Thanatos* emerges as guilt, which is inwardly-turned aggression or masochism that erodes self-concept paralleling the pull toward identity dissolution and provokes the ego to further mismanage the id. From masochism, sadism evolves in outwardly directed behaviors ranging from subliminal, covert demonstrations of avoidance and separation to overt, aggressive physical acts all feeding the illusion that one has the will to power or the ability to control externality. Over time, if the ego continually idealizes similar but different aspects of the superego, the death instinct assumes the form of repetitive compulsion. A healthy mind supports the “maintenance of a modulated repression that allows gratification while at the same preventing primitive sexual and aggressive impulses from taking over” [7, p. 19]. *Eros* and *Thanatos* are “fused, blended, and alloyed with each other” [4, p. 381] to cancel each other’s energies: without one the other would accede to break societal rules.

In object relations theory, the mother or object represents the superego that is the newborn’s or the ego’s first attachment [8] [9] [10] [11] and as a transitional object, the breast signifies the mother. The infant *idealizes* the ‘good’ breast and projects love onto it because through the transfer of milk it triggers feelings of the mother’s life sustaining reassurance or holding (i.e. love, adoration, care) that the infant wants but that also generates envy because it is beyond the infant’s control. The breast becomes simultaneously a frustrating, terrifying, ‘bad’ object perceived to have persecutorial power (i.e. hate,

envy, spite) to destroy both the infant and the 'good' object, causing separation anxiety and annihilation - feelings synonymous with fear of death. To eliminate ambiguity while in this *paranoid schizoid position*, the child uses splitting to exaggerate differences so part of the object becomes either all 'good' or reassuring and the other, all 'bad' and persecutorial. Unwanted negative feelings emanate from the id so the ego projects these in the 'bad' object "...for the purpose of containing the threats posed by that instinct" [7, p. 93]. Setting boundaries around the 'bad object' is to protect the 'good' object and provide refuge for ego development. Because *Thanatos* is also embodied by envy, the 'good' object too is harmed and hope is destroyed. Coetaneously, through projective identification (e.g. avoidance, cringing, crying) the infant induces guilt in the mother for disrupting her reassurance. As the child matures, it transitions to the *depressive position* understanding that it can simultaneously hate and love the same breast and the mother. This process emphasizes the 'good breast' as the core around which the ego can develop while simultaneously allowing the repression of 'bad breast' memories, balancing the life instinct with the death instinct.

Through memory, the paranoid-schizoid position is a constant threat because it is always available to us and so can never be truly transcended in adulthood. In groups, anxious followers are 'infants' and the formal leader is 'mother' who is to 'hold' members' identities between poles of submergence within and isolation from the group, which is reassuring, enviable and "humiliating, because the need for leadership questions the autonomy and freedom of individuals, and dangerous, because leadership so often seems to connote the *Fuhrerprinzip*" [12, p. 5]. Yet, through *Eros*, there is a constant need to be a part of a group that is continually tempered with *Thanatos*, the individual's fear of identity loss, "which means to accept that within each individual is the desire to be an autonomous individual, the desire to submerge oneself in the group, and a perpetual conflict between these two desires" [12, p. 5]. Anxiety from this paradox induces *primordial splitting*, or the hiding of the most valued parts of the self before joining the group. Initially, members are part objects with punctured egos allowing persecutorial memories to surface. The group is fragmented or *premature* with diminished reflexive capability and *poor mental health*. In a dialectical twist, it allows itself to be controlled by the weakest, strongest, sickest, healthiest splitter and projective identifier, the "aggressive imager" [12, p. 45]. Because of anxiety and envy, the aggressive imager splits the formal leader into all 'good' and all 'bad' parts. The 'good' is introjected and the 'bad' projected into group members' containers until all group members learn to hate or *kill off* the formal leader, which parallels disruption of the reassuring *holding pattern* remembered from infancy. Through overt and covert projective identification (i.e. body language; voice inflection) the aggressive imager makes a promise to replace reassurance that also passed on with the formal leader and to punish non-conformists. To mitigate group rejection and isolation, non-reflexive group members believe they have a 'good mother' who will provide necessary holding and so become subjugated to a new and immature worldview. The leadership sacrifice creates guilt and feelings of *deadness*. Smaller groups have fewer *hating* containers and are more likely to use mourning as a defense to regenerate reflexivity and change. Sabina Spielrein argues that the inevitability of love leads to *partial* destruction as a *transformational* act. She concludes that: "Death is horrible; yet death in the service of the sexual instinct, which includes a destructive component, is a salutary blessing since it leads to a coming into being" [13, p. 183]. So, to invoke *Eros*, the group may also engage in real or metaphorical sex to diminish *Thanatos*' energy: "the impulse of the positive component simultaneously summons forth the impulse of the negative component and opposes it" [13, p. 174]. However, should *hopelessness* become entangled with *deadness*, the result is that the premature group can never learn to hold itself, so it dies.

Implications For Organizational Behavior

If the ego perceives change will result in threat, mourning, decay and death, extreme anxiety induces mortality salience or triggers the individual to reflect on her or his own death [14], which results in various degrees of inward and outwardly directed aggression leading to individual and ultimately, organizational powerlessness [15]. Psychological perceptual distortions [16] originate from defenses against identity dissolution or separation from worldviews resulting from organizational change. Klein's view directs our attention to the manner in which, in the face of anxiety, we split the world into good and bad objects, which is akin to the development of the halo effect that skews both individual and organizational performance measurements. Workers can habitually come to identify change with only the 'bad breast' which attacks self-efficacy and creates change avoidance and guilt eventually manifesting itself into covert and overt change blocking [17] including physical attacks on change agents. Alford's theory on projective identification along with selective perception means eventually, many others in the organization will learn to view change in the same way. That there is resistance to organizational change is not a revelation. What would be significant is the development of change models that integrate time and space to mourn losses of self-concept to mitigate fears of identity annihilation so to establish safety nets for processes of partial identity dissolution for creativity and physical and mental "energy and hope" [18, p. 419] [13].

When rules of conduct are modified, there are impacts on the individual's superego that may seriously contradict the ego's view on managing the id. When the rules change too rapidly, cannot be understood or their outcomes are perceived to result as reminders of persecution, self-esteem and self-efficacy are minimized. Expectancy theory reminds us that this affects motivation. The outcome is change that results in regression to the mean, to the state of zero energy such as when *Thanatos* cancels the energy of *Eros*. If motivation to participate in future change is zero then, the expectancy that future change will be successful is also zero. Disruptions to the holding of transitional objects so as to please only the object or organization are instrumental in encouraging employees' *Thanatic* reactions. Employee involvement is instrumental in effecting organizational change [19] but for the reason of co-management and co-maintenance of self-concept, an essential component of buffering the individual from the realization of mortality so severe defensive reactions are withheld.

Reliance on an external locus of control becomes especially prevalent when considering the death instinct in group relations. Alford's interpretation alerts us to unreal expectations we might have of our leaders that foster within us the perceived ability to relieve ourselves of responsibility to reflect and consider issues on their merits. The death instinct can manifest itself in the characteristics of toxic formal and informal leaders who, if left to their own unexamined devices use projective identification to construct toxic environments and mutate what was once considered to be a healthy organization into a hazardous waste container [5] [6] [20] [21] [22]. "The paradox is that the more people become defended against death, and inevitability of their own death, the more it becomes possible for death to be manufactured and split off from life" [23] and the more likely it is that lives will be negatively affected. In other words, there is a need to recognize that death is the framework for holding organizational life.

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