Psychoanalytic Approach

Psychoanalysis is the branch of depth psychology founded by Sigmund Freud. It is both a clinical practice aimed at alleviating mental disorder and a theoretical body of knowledge about unconscious mental processes and their conscious manifestations. Though psychoanalysis has not been a major tradition in the development of organizational theory, it has made some notable contributions to areas of organizational theory, such as group and leadership dynamics and organizational culture. It has also found some interesting applications in organizational consultation.

Conceptual Overview

The distinguishing feature of psychoanalysis is the assumption of an unconscious dimension to social and individual life, one in which both ideas and emotions may operate. The unconscious works both as a mental territory in which dangerous and painful ideas and desires are consigned through repression and other defensive mechanisms, and also as a source of resistances to specific ideas and emotions that present threats to mental functioning. Unconscious ideas, desires, and emotions may be of a sexual nature but may also be related to ambition, envy, fear (of death or of failure), and the like. These often reach consciousness in highly distorted or abstruse ways, requiring interpretation. One of the commonest manifestations of the unconscious are fantasies —mental representations that express unconscious wishes and desires as if they were already realized, yet often in a disguised and indirect manner. Fantasies are equally important in understanding the actions of people in and out of organizations—daydreaming consumers, ambitious leaders, bullied employees, budding entrepreneurs, disaffected voters, and so forth are as liable to be guided and driven by their fantasies as by rational considerations of interests, ends, and means.

All people have an unconscious, and everyone represses unpleasant and disturbing thoughts and emotions. Everyone suffers from the consequences of these repressions. Everyone experiences mental conflict, ambivalence, anxiety, and behavioral symptoms that sometimes cannot be tamed or controlled. Some suffer from unusually severe and debilitating versions of these effects. A key task of psychoanalytic interventions is to restore the contents of the unconscious mind by undoing the effect of repressions and other defense mechanisms. This is especially the case if these mechanisms are dysfunctional; if, in other words, the anxiety, inhibition, and pain that they cause outweigh the comfort and protection that they afford. Psychoanalytic interpretation is the process whereby the hidden meanings of actions, desires, and emotions are gradually brought to light by viewing conscious phenomena as the distorted expressions of unconscious ones. This is a difficult and time-consuming process, because the unconscious resists attempts to reveal its content.

Some of the other core theories of psychoanalysis concern the development of sexuality through a number of stages, the theory of transference through which individuals in later life transfer feelings and fantasies onto different people from those toward whom such feelings and fantasies were originally addressed, and the theory of narcissism, according to which all people address some of their sexual interest toward themselves, seeking to make themselves the center of attention and admiration.

Psychoanalysis and Organizations

The world of organizations, impersonal, structured, and formalized, was for a long time thought of as being at

the opposite end of the intimate, personal relations that formed the primary concerns of psychoanalysis. Gradually, however, the appreciation of irrational, emotional, and sexual aspects of organizations have opened up the possibility of using psychoanalytic insights in organizational analysis. These insights include the following:

1. People in and out of organizations are emotional and sexual beings, beings with personal and family histories.

Viewing people as emotional and sexual beings neither denies nor underestimates the importance of reason and rationality in human affairs. Even rational acts, however, are often underwritten by an emotional agenda, such as ambition, excitement, anger, fear, nostalgia, and so forth. These emotions provide the fuel behind seemingly rational or reasonable acts.

The key psychoanalytic idea that links people's histories to their experiences in organizations is *transference*, a process whereby feelings (e.g., admiration, fear, resentment) and images (e.g., omnipotence, mystery, beauty) once attached to parental figures become transferred onto figures who come to occupy similar unconscious locations in later life. Such figures may be idealized or vilified.

2. Through work, people seek to fulfill deeper unconscious desires.

In contrast to motivation theories, psychoanalytic approaches recognize the complexity and dynamic quality of human motivation. Motivation is not a question of finding the right button and pressing it, but recognizing that, through work, people pursue many different conscious and unconscious aims. Some people sublimate or channel into work most of their physical and emotional energies. Yet others work hard to build their self-esteem, to earn the respect of others, or ostentatiously to display commitment to their organization. Some may work nonstop as workaholics to outperform their rivals (often acting like children seeking a special affection in the heart of a parent) or, equally, to dodge domestic obligations toward spouses, children, and other "loved ones." Some may even work as a means of overcoming their fear of death, seeking immortality in the legacy that they may leave.

3. Organizations, as parts of society, become sites where broader social and cultural dynamics are enacted.

Psychoanalysis does not seek to reduce organizations to the psychology of individuals. Social and cultural phenomena, such as religious ideas, political conflicts, and economic interests, become part of every individual's psyche through the influence of identification with role models and even through the different uses of language. In this connection, as seen in the work of Adrian Carr, the term *psychostructure* is used to describe the ways that language functions to embed such social and cultural features into the individual psyche.

Organizations then become arenas where wider social dynamics, for instance those relating to class, race, gender, and so forth, are acted out. Wider cultural trends, such as authoritarianism or narcissism, can also weave themselves into the psychostructures of organizations, affecting organizational phenomena, including leadership, communication, and group relations. Different organizations may have different psychostructures; for instance, different configurations allow different displays of emotion, different manifestations of disagreement and conflict, different outlets for aggression and solidarity. These are expressed in different cultural and social artifacts that organizations use to express their identity, including buildings, logos, offices, language uses, and communication devices. All of these may then be interpreted to yield insights into shared conscious or unconscious fantasies among organizational members. In this way, a massive building may stand as a symbol of omnipotence, as a manifestation of arrogance and hubris, or as an indication of self-doubt and insecurity.

4. Organizations offer certain defenses against anxieties that they provoke.

Anxiety can be an incapacitating emotion that individuals seek to avoid through the mechanisms of defense.

Organizations breed anxiety in many forms by making unyielding demands on individuals—that they should control their spontaneity and emotion; that they should work with people they do not necessarily like, doing tasks that they do not necessarily enjoy, often being treated in an impersonal and cold way; that they should display loyalty and commitment toward an entity that may casually dismiss "redundant" employees; that they should do tasks for which they do not feel adequately prepared or clearly briefed, that are psychological demanding and sometimes physically dangerous. In addition, they exacerbate anxieties that individuals may carry with them over their self-worth, their competence, and their ability to get on with others (including with leaders and followers).

The containment of such anxieties within organizations has been the focus of numerous widely accepted theories developed by Elliott Jaques, Isabel Menzies-Lythe, and others. The downside of these organizational or social defenses against anxiety are different dysfunctional routines that stunt creativity, block the expression of emotion or conflict, and, above all, undermine the organization's rational and effective functioning. If individual defenses immerse the individual in a world of neurotic make-believe, organizational defenses immerse their members in collective delusions, in which they pursue chimerical projects or run blindly away from nonexistent threats while disregarding real problems and opportunities.

5. Organizations also open up possibilities of realizing collective visions and stimulating creativity.

Organizations make considerable demands on an individual's mental functioning, but they also offer a variety of compensations and possibilities. They boost their members' sense of self-esteem by lending them their prowess and glamour. To some, organizations offer creative outlets, to others opportunities to develop and exercise leadership qualities or other technical and social skills.

The concept of organizational ideal, as elaborated by Schwartz, is particularly useful—an idealized image of the organization that is endowed with desirable qualities, power, success, efficiency, and even immortality, which can then become part of the egoideal of many members, enhancing their sense of achievement and worth, enabling them to handle adversity and drawing dedication, imagination, and even self-sacrifice out of them.

Critical Commentary and Future Directions

Theorists who have adopted psychoanalytic insights in their engagement with organizations have done so from one of two directions. One has been to study organizations as dominant features of Western society and culture, examining their demands on individuals, their influence on interpersonal relations in and out of work, their effects on people's emotional lives, and the manner in which they feature in people's fantasies and dreams. A whole range of organizational phenomena can be approached in this manner, including leadership, group dynamics, insults and jokes, sexual harassment, psychological contracts and obedience, and so forth. This approach can be summed up as *studying organizations psychoanalytically.*

A different approach that can be described as *psychoanalyzing organizations* starts from a more pragmatic concern, seeking to psychoanalyze organizations as though they were ailing patients. If psychoanalysis can return a patient to normal functioning, can it not be used as a method of organizational intervention, enhancing organizational functioning? Organizational interventions seek to identify repressed forces, such as rivalries, fears of failure, anger over betrayals, disappointments, and frustrations, which systematically inhibit collaboration, creativity, harmony, and organizational performance and to redress them. Following important work on groups by Wilfred Bion, this approach was pioneered at the Tavistock Institute in London, and in the United States, by scholars such as Harry Levinson, Abraham Zaleznik, Larry Hirschhorn, Michael Diamond, and theorists/consultants associated with the William Alanson White Institute.

This approach can go further still in *psychoanalyzing organizations* by diagnosing certain pathological processes in organizations, such as paranoia, megalomania, self-delusion, and anxiety, which directly mirror similar processes among individuals, so that, in a certain way, it can be said that the entire organization becomes

afflicted by neurosis. Such a neurotic organization, in turn, infects everyone who comes into contact with it, as an employee, as a stakeholder, or even as a leader. Following the work of Manfred Kets de Vries and Danny Miller, organizations can then be seen as mirroring the individual psyche and, in particular, the psyche of their leader.

Pscyhoanalytic approaches to the study of organizations have rarely been directly criticized, because they have never occupied the center ground in the discipline. They have, however, suffered in the Anglo-Saxon world from the declining fortunes of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic treatment as well as from the, sometimes intemperate and misplaced, criticisms of its founder. However, as many scholars of organizations become interested in symbolic, irrational, and emotional aspects, the insights of psychoanalysis may become more mainstream and its applications more widespread.

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