

The Relational Consultant

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Abstract

The rise of relational transactional analysis in conjunction with a reconnection of transactional analysis with its psychoanalytic roots raises the question of the importance of these developments for organizational consultants in transactional analysis. This article explores what psychoanalysis and group relations offer to organizational consultants. The focus is on three core aspects of psychoanalysis: its perspective, the value of the object relations approach, and the understanding of the role of the unconscious. From there three contributions of psychoanalysis to consulting in organizations are elaborated and integrated in a relational approach to consulting. The key is the understanding of the role of the consultant as the “signifier of transformation” (Bollas, 1987, p. 14), who, while working with a client-organization, supports the organization in integrating its ways of relating into its way of being.

About 10-15 years ago it became increasingly clear that naming just three schools (Barnes, 1977) in transactional analysis (classical, redecision, and Cathexis) was becoming outdated. Since the late 1990s, transactional analysis has abandoned the term “schools” and now refers to different transactional analysis approaches (Tudor & Hobbes, 2002). In the 1980s, the integrative approach (Erskine & Moursund, 1988; Erskine, Moursund, & Trautmann, 1999) was developed as was the systemic approach (Schmid, 1988, 1991, 1995). In the 1990s, two other approaches in transactional analysis were added: constructivist (Loria, 1997) and cocreative (Summers & Tudor, 2000). The

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youngest shoot from the transactional analysis “tree” is relational transactional analysis (see Figure 1). This approach has been developing gradually over the past 20 years until it reached full flight with Hargaden and Sills’s 2002 book entitled *Transactional Analysis: A Relational Perspective*. This development is in conjunction with reevaluating the psychoanalytic roots of transactional analysis and finding a new balance with psychoanalytic authors and streams such as object relations. At transactional analysis conferences, workshops and panels on a relational perspective are offered. Anno 2005, a Web forum on relational transactional analysis, is flourishing; the *Transactional Analysis Journal (TAJ)* devoted a theme issue to “Transactional Analysis and Psychoanalysis” (Hargaden, 2005); and Cornell and Hargaden (2005) edited a book of 16 *TAJ* articles that presaged and provided a foundation for the current development of relational transactional analysis.

“The shift from a cognitive informational psychotherapy towards an affective, transformational psychotherapy has become evident in the evolution of relational paradigms in transactional analysis as well as psychoanalysis” (Cornell & Hargaden, 2005, p. 6). Given the flow of energy around this new approach in transactional analysis and psychoanalysis, Cornell (2005) has already warned of the danger of developing an idealizing transference in relation to it.

It is obvious that the current rapprochement of transactional analysis and psychoanalysis in the shared area of relational psychotherapy is an important development for psychotherapists. But what is the impact for those transactional analysts who practice as consultants, trainers, educators, and counselors? Is not the focus of these applications much more on the behavioral, functional side of transactional analysis, for which the classical approaches offer enough concepts and methods to work with? Is not the fine-tuning of the working relationship between the client and the transactional analyst in a role

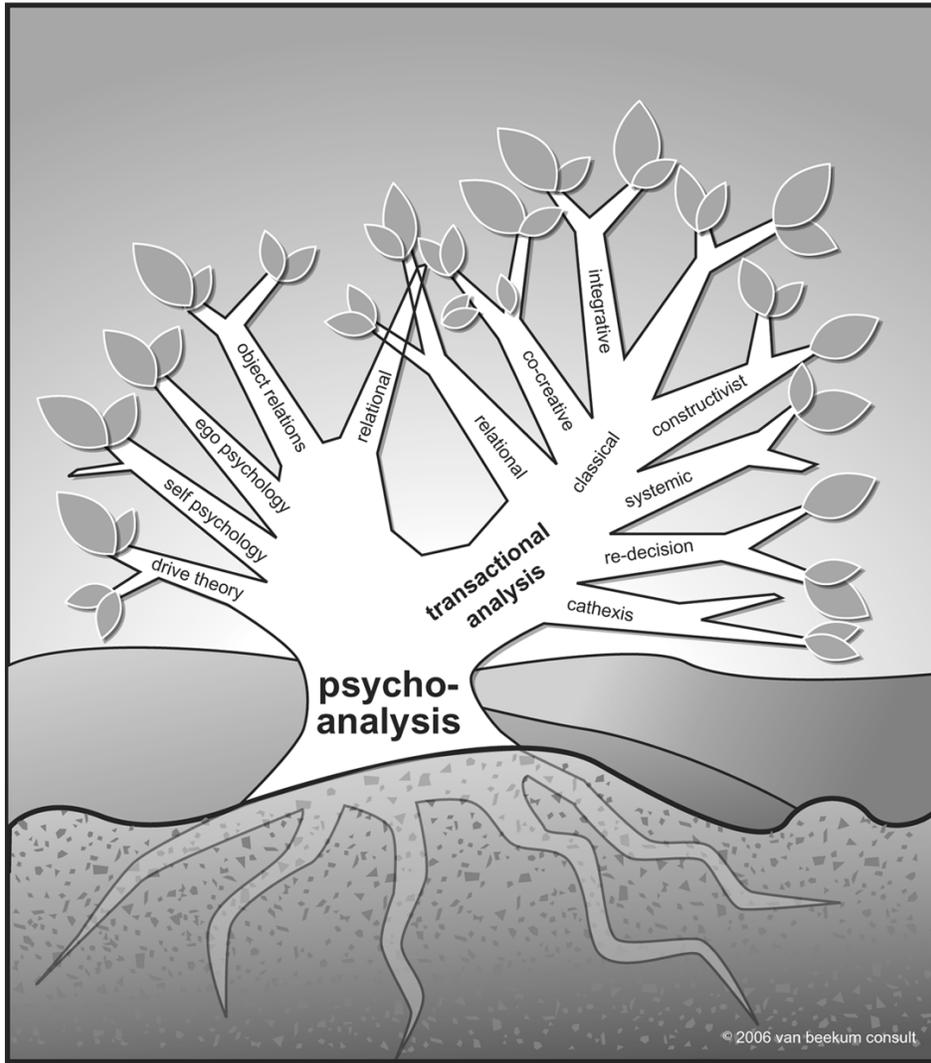


Figure 1
Roots and Branches

as trainer, consultant, teacher, minister, or lawyer of marginal interest? Can working with the unconscious and with transference and countertransference be applied in the classroom, the boardroom, the consulting room, and in other settings? In general, does relational transactional analysis and do analytic approaches on the level of the individual (psychoanalysis) or the group (group relations) add value for practitioners other than psychotherapists?

Psychoanalytic Perspective

To explore the importance of these developments for organizational applications, let us look into what psychoanalysis and group relations theory have to offer to consultants who work with clients that are organizations, cultural and ethnic groups, or even societies.

For many years, psychoanalytic theories about large groups, institutions, and organizations have mainly dealt with the individuals' intrapsychic

experience of a large group, with its leaders representing images of fathers, mothers, or idealized self and its members representing all variations of sibling rivalry. Although this has led to an in-depth understanding of the individuals' relationships to a large group or an organization, the missing point has been the identity of the large group or organization in its own right.

Gestalt therapy and systems approaches have taught that the total of a group is larger than the sum of the parts. But many consultants experience that it is hard to work with the collective rather than the individual. To understand organizational behavior, they tend to fall back onto using concepts that were designed for understanding individual behavior. Vansina-Cobbaert (2002) argues that consultants often seem to forget about the differences between individual and organizational realities. They largely limit themselves to the application of (individual) psychoanalytic concepts to observed organizational phenomena.

Once I was on the staff of an international group relations conference somewhere in Europe. In the preparatory meeting, one of the issues that came up among the 10 staff people was the diversity of our mother tongues and the difficulty of understanding one other when each was speaking his or her own language. This was expected to be part of the dynamic among the staff and the conference participants as well, and we reflected on how we might exclude and be excluded when we were all speaking our own languages. In our reflections on this issue, we became aware that, despite language barriers, there was one language that we all spoke: the language of psychoanalysis. And this was not about specific concepts or contents or even methods. What we shared was the language of a perspective. What psychoanalysis has to offer to organizations and to organizational consultants is not a framework of concepts; it is not a model but a perspective about working with the unconscious of the organization. A key assumption for organizational consulting from an analytic perspective is that the answer to the way ahead is already available in the organization, but it is blocked by unconscious processes (Obholzer, 1994).

The notion of language is metaphorically important. Language, in all its literal and symbolical forms, is the often inadequate vehicle for bridging the intersubjective dynamic between consultant and client. Language transcends the distinction between preverbal and verbal and with that, between the conscious and unconscious. Exploring the theory of intersubjectivity and elaborating on Trevarthen's work (1979), Hargaden and Fenton (2005) mention a third subjectivity, wherein mutual, dialectic, and unconscious dynamics between two individuals meet. It is neither the mother nor the infant but "a space that is created between infant and caretaker" that highlights "the notion of a shared mind, meaning shared subjectivity" (p. 177). Emotions and experience, carried by language, are not simply within the two parties, but "we could say that the relationship between two individuals contains more than the sum of the parts" (p. 177). This is the area in which the consultant works relationally and participates in the process by exercising expressiveness and restraint about his or her strong emotions, which inevitably emerge in the relationship (see Mitchell, 2000).

Object Relations

For understanding the organizational unconscious, the group relations approach offers interesting insights. A group relations approach is associated with Bion (1961) and his descriptions of work groups versus basic assumption groups. Interesting casework can be found in publications by Obholzer and Zagier Roberts (1994) and Klein, Gabelnick, and Herr (2000). Bion was a practicing psychoanalyst who saw himself as independent theoretically, although he was close to the object relations school. His findings go back to his work with groups at the Tavistock Clinic in London in the 1940s and 1950s. He speculated about two types of groups: the work group and the basic assumption group. In a work group one works toward the primary task (which is the task a group or an organization must carry out in order to survive) with a minimum of disruption, notwithstanding the anxieties that occur in this process. In a basic assumption group, by contrast (referred to by others as a survival group), one is in the grip of

unconscious processes that take the group away from the work. Dependency, fight/flight, pairing (Bion, 1961), one-ness (Turquet, 1975), and, most recently, me-ness (Bain & Gould, 2000) are researched as ways in which the unconscious process is acted out. This unconscious process is informed by the Kleinian understanding of such concepts as splitting (good and bad objects) and projective identification (Klein, 1975b). Bion used these concepts, seeing them as unconscious group phenomena, to underpin his theory of groups. At an unconscious level, the group provides stimuli that come close to the infantile/primitive representation of the mother in the experience of its members. He therefore put these Kleinian concepts at the center of group behavior. In the

paranoid-schizoid state (Klein, 1975a, p. 14), the behavior in an organization is based on splitting and projective identification. It is about “us” (the virtue) and “them” (the blame), and the organization operates on the basis of fragmentation. By contrast, a depressive state (p. 14) in an organization puts the emphasis on integration, working with the conflict within, and operating on the basis of containment.

Bion’s (1961) diagram of group process (Figure 2) describes the options groups and organizations have for moving from early regressive patterns, such as splitting and projective identification acted out in a basic assumption group mode until it becomes a work group, although the tendency to basic assumption behavior always remains.

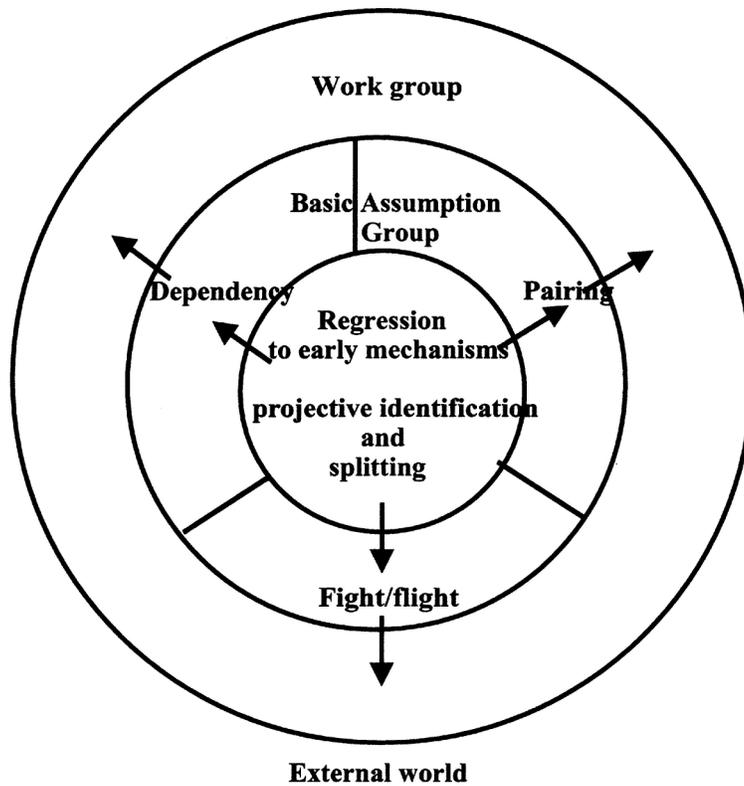


Figure 2
Bion's Group Diagram (Bion, 1961, p. 48)

Basic assumption group functions are active before ever a group comes together in a room, and continue after the group has dispersed. There is neither development nor decay in the basic assumption functions, and in this respect they differ totally from the work group. . . . [Therefore,] two different kinds of mental functioning operate within the group at the same time. (p. 172).

Bion's theories are, in essence, optimistic. They are inviting, as with all psychoanalytic methodology, to research and curiosity, with a basic belief in development, change, and improvement. "I think that one of the striking things about a group is that despite the influence of the basic assumptions, it is the group work that triumphs in the long run" (Bion, 1961, p. 77). In fact, the research and curiosity about learning create an opportunity for an organization to renew contact with once cut-off and blocked internal and external options. It is getting into contact again, through the pain of discovery, that brings change. Again, it is not about concepts and knowing how to apply them; it is about a process of relational attention that heals the disruptions in contact and leads to change. Once an organization is in full contact with internal and external process, there is no need to chase change, because it simply occurs (Polster & Polster, 1974). This full contact is eventually what creates autonomy (van Beekum & Krijgsman, 2000).

The analytic work occurs through the pain of discovery and by working through the unconscious defenses of fragmentation, denial, and splitting that block change. In his study of group identity—specifically large cultural group identity—Volkan (1999) researched the splitting concepts of "chosen trauma" and "chosen glory" (p. 19). These reflect a group's (un)conscious choice of "shared mental representations of past historic events that are passed down from one generation into the next and become specific markers of large group identity" (Volkan, 1999, p. 19). He did his research in a series of unofficial dialogues between Egyptians, Israelis, and Palestinians between 1979 and 1986. The chosen glories—visible in selected symbols, heroes, and rituals (Hofstede, 1991)—

boost self-esteem and identity. But since they are cut off and not integrated, they promote a false self (see Kohut, 1971) that leads to collective narcissism. An illustration of this was a consultant who was greeted with disbelief when he arrived years ago at BMW's headquarters in Munich for a consulting job, and he was driving a Saab. It became an issue during the consulting because it was unheard of at the company for anyone who worked there to drive an "enemy" brand and not to join in the glory of the BMW brand—even a consultant who was supposed to be independent. In times of stress, leaders and managers often reactivate such representations of glory to bolster collective self-esteem that can then be used or abused in competition with the outside (enemy) world.

In contrast, chosen traumas support this self-image from the other side by adding the demonization of the other, onto which all split-off bad parts are projected. It is easy to be selective with trauma when it fits a culture's self-*imago*. For example, people in the Netherlands (the author's native country) simply project badness onto their neighbor Germany, conveniently splitting these projections off from themselves. Arrogance, for example, then becomes a German feature and is never examined as a quality of people in the Netherlands. Winnicott (as cited in Volkan, 1999, p. 20) described the unintegrated individual as a circle with a dividing line in the middle separating good (+) and bad (-). Moiso (1985, p. 198) used the same idea to differentiate between P_{1+} and P_{1-} . Volkan (1999) argues that the shared line suggests that there is still contact between the two parts, which makes the split less borderline and more neurotic. He believes that the reality in organizations and large groups is often that the two parts are separated by a gap, suggesting that there is no contact between them. The chosen glories—the positive split-off good identity—are absolutely separate from the chosen traumas—the split-off and projected badness (p. 18) (see Figure 3). Mending this split is enormously difficult and time-consuming, if it is possible at all.

Not-Knowing

Transactional analysts also champion the

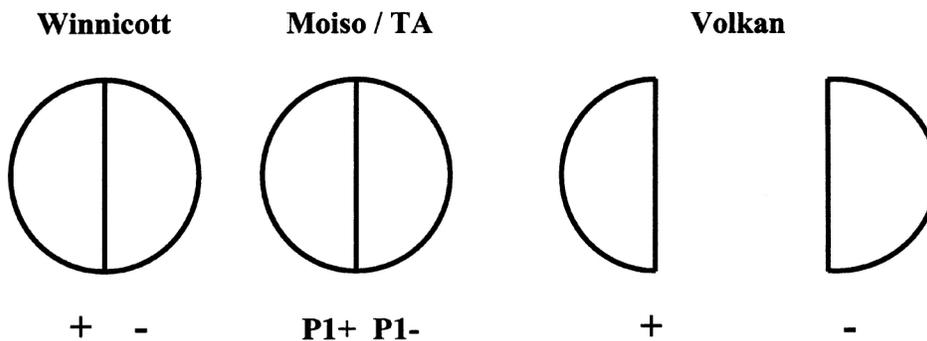


Figure 3
Spitting

idea that the expertise for problem solving is hidden in the client (the power is in the patient), cut off by unaware dynamics; they also suggest that the consultant or therapist is not the expert. They focus on what is “out of awareness” for the client, which reveals an important difference between transactional analysis and psychoanalysis. Shown metaphorically in Figure 4, what is conscious forms the 10% of the iceberg above sea level. In working with something that is out of awareness, the assumption is that it can be brought into awareness and then be conscious, known, managed, and changed. In psychoanalysis, this level of out of awareness is referred to as preconscious, and it is accessible by psychotherapy. Freud (1925, p. 357) distinguished between the conscious, the direct and pure observation of reality; the preconscious, the latent part that is potentially conscious; and the unconscious, the repressed part that is not potentially conscious. The idea of the unconscious thus goes into deeper layers of not knowing and probably never knowing, although something from this level may bubble up occasionally and make itself known. The making of meaning is through analysis, which is the curious exploring of hypotheses about potential meaning, while always being prepared to let go of a once found and embraced meaning for a new meaning.

The place and philosophy of unconscious process is central in the work of organizational consultants, who pursue the task of supporting organizational transformation. Transformation can be defined as a passage from one state to another in a process that is neither regular nor continuous mainly due to the working of the unconscious. Gutmann and Pierre (2000) use the metaphor of a black box for the working of the transformation process and the unconscious. This box is the uncontrollable and unpredictable part in the evolution of an organization. Inside the box are those irrational elements that, at best, may be observable in interactions between members and between the organization and the outside world. At its worst, they may be experienced as coming out of the blue. This is the world below the tip of the iceberg. Behavior-driven consultants (and organizations) prefer to take this black box for granted and never research it. The relational consultant is willing to look into it. As Bion (1970) emphasized, “not knowing” is the state of mind in which the consultant enters the relationship with the client.

It is the consultant’s job to eschew memory and desire from the consultancy situation. The more the consultant becomes expert at excluding memory, desire, and understanding from his or her own mental activity, the more he or

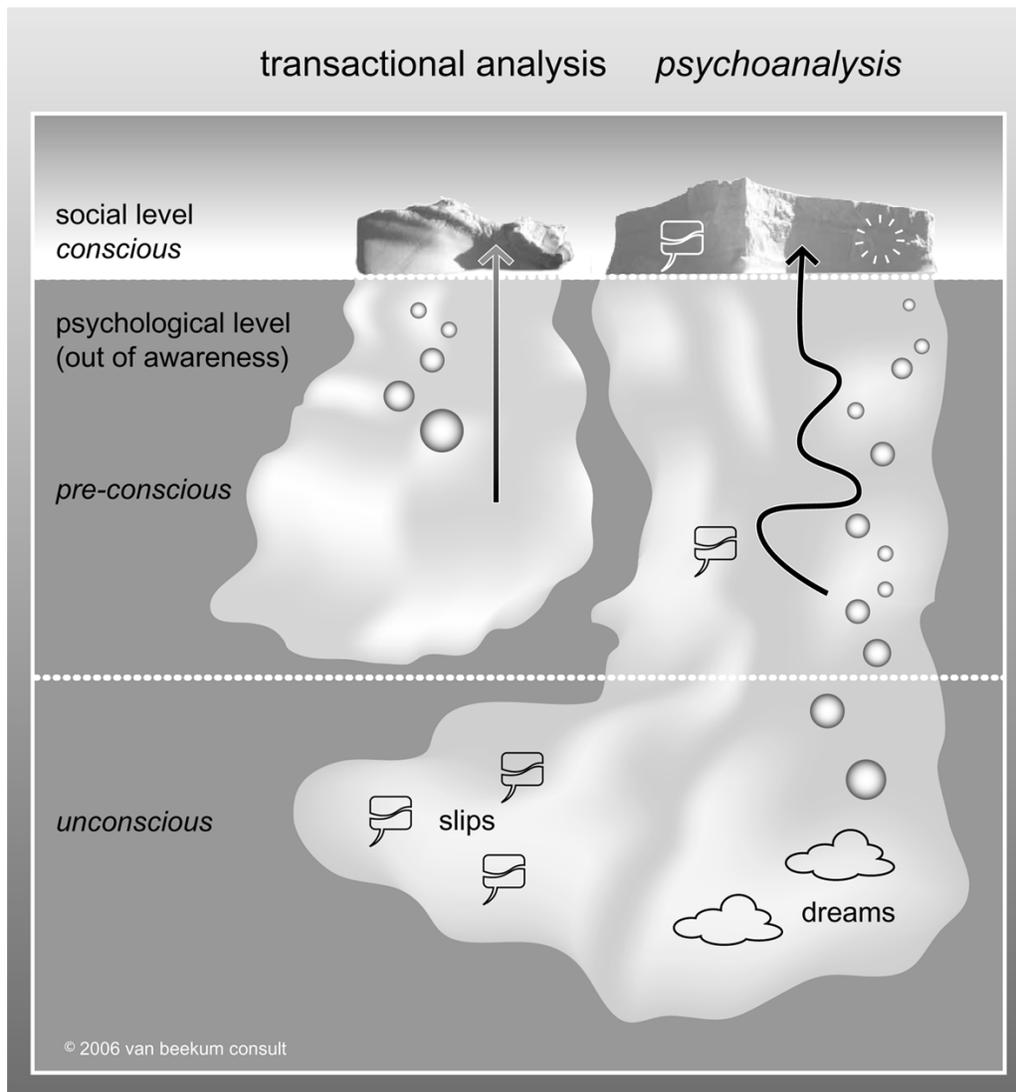


Figure 4
Icebergs

she is likely to experience painful emotions that are usually excluded or screened by memory of the session or analytical theories, by disguised desires or denials of ignorance, or by “understanding.”

Bion (1974) links this quality of eschewing memory and desire with what he calls the

“alpha function” in the person. This function transforms emotional experience into dream-thoughts, and only then do emotional experiences become personal possessions as opposed to “facts” that just “are.” (For a subtle account of Bion’s alpha and beta functioning, see Landaiche’s [2005] recent *TAJ* article.] I recall

a consulting job during which the work of the group inflated my dreams at night. The reported data from the group started another life in me; they lost their direct meaning and created different meanings that came rumbling up from deep within me in an irreversible process that was impossible to hold back. This made the working of the alpha function also a very physical process. When this alpha function is absent, emotional happening and all inner and outer stimuli just sit in the personality and do not move or go anywhere near to becoming a personal possession. Symington (1986) goes as far as to say that “only those interpretations that result from the operation of alpha function, are effective. It is only these that make contact with the client” (p. 286). The most important aspect for the consultant that allows the alpha function to emerge is emotional space, which is favored by time, relaxation, reverie, and the ability to contain fear.

Whatever metaphor one uses for the unconscious and the transformation process, from an analytic perspective the relational organizational consultant uses three channels of attention: (1) by looking at the way the unconscious system influences organizational behavior, (2) by accepting that unconscious phenomena reveal themselves slowly and indirectly, and (3) by working relationally with the unconscious system as it exists and is active in the here and now.

1. *Looking at the way the unconscious system influences organizational behavior.* Earlier I mentioned the idea that groups may be engaged in either work or basic assumption activity. Without pretending to be complete, we can follow several related paths for further observations.

There is the perspective that basically goes back to classical Freudian drive theory with libido and mortido, the raw life and death instincts (the id) as driving unconscious forces within organizations. This driving energy can be seen as a bubble bath in which creative and destructive energy is bubbling up all the time from an independent source, leading to existential anxieties. Freudian slips and dreams are channels (royal roads) to connecting with this anxiety-provoking unconscious world.

Organizations and most management theories work from the assumption that they can control this chaotic energy and anxiety, and many consultants collude with that view by giving wording to mission statements, setting clear organizational goals, building structures, defining roles, setting procedures, and so on. Berne (1947/1971) suggested that this control is possible because for him ego is “the organ of mastery” that works “in accordance with the reality principle” (pp. 73-74). Freud was less sure. He mentioned learning, not controlling. Learning about this energy is done by analytic work (Freud, 1925, p. 365), but this learning can only marginally be controlled. Freud used the metaphor of the rodeo rider on a wild horse: If the rider (ego) does not want to be separated from the horse (id), which is more powerful than he is, the rider has no other choice but to pretend he leads the horse (p. 369). A good deal of organizational consulting is like that: pretending to control the process and colluding with leadership who believes the same myth.

This brings in the perspective of observing organizational myths as expressions of the working of the unconscious. The construction of social realities will always lack objectivity, and it therefore becomes the object of personal subjective discrimination. “Myth as a concept implies and confirms the fact that man, through his choice and selection of possibilities, is giving meaning to the world which otherwise presents itself to him as total chaos” (Sievers, 1994, p. 183). The myth in organizational constructed realities is that these realities are objective and therefore have immortal value. Sievers focuses in particular on the myth of leadership, which he names the “perpetuation of immaturity” (p. 158).

Another perspective involves observing splitting and projective identification dynamics. Through projective identification, members of an organization or group are “connected to each other by passion, indifference, silence, contempt, respect, love, guilt, hate and in other ways. The patterning of projective identification *bonds* group members together” (Wells, 1995). These are unconscious alliances—often manifesting in consciously unrecognizable ways—that connect the members.

Finally, there is the perspective of looking at different key personalities and their motives, needs, defenses, fantasies, symptoms, fears, anxieties, pathologies, and disorders (Kets de Vries, 1996; Kets de Vries, Baum, Diamond, & Gilkey, 1991). Organizational structure and dynamics can be observed in the context of these personality aspects of founders and directors. The decline of organizations, especially family businesses (only 10% of family businesses survive into the third generation), has a good deal to do with obsessive identification with the business of the founders, which does not work well down the line of heritage. Even monarchy, as a family business, follows the same pattern. For example, in monarchist France, Louis XIV built the power base and the luxury, Louis XV enjoyed it and spent it, and Louis XVI was killed for it.

2. *Accepting that unconscious phenomena reveal themselves slowly and indirectly.* Observable dynamics are everywhere in organizations, including in forms of order, structures and procedures, missed appointments, forgotten decisions, lost opportunities, unexplainable conflict, unexpected resistance, and alliances among members of the organization as expressions of projective identification and splitting. They take time to be discovered, more time to be named and recognized, still more time to be accepted, and much more time to be owned. This is a slow, zigzag path, one that is chaotic, erratic, and discontinuous. The consultant to this process represents the other who brings diversity and otherness. In cooperation with the leaders and managers of the organization, the consultant is part of the sustaining triangle (Gutmann & Pierre, 2000, p. 25) that can hold an organization through its process of transformation, especially in the phases of not knowing.

3. *Working relationally with the unconscious system as it exists and is active in the here and now.* Just as the psychotherapist is a new object in the client's life (van Beekum, 2005), we can consider the consultant to be a new object in the organization's life in terms of the object being sought "for its function as a signifier of transformation" (Bollas, 1987, p. 14). It is not so much the longing and desire to relate to the consultant as an object in himself or herself, it

is also the searching for the object as a transformational force in the life of the organization. The purpose of seeking this transformational object is to recollect an early object experience and a relationship that is identified with cumulative transformational experience.

This is where the operational part of the relational approach comes in. Relational psychoanalysis and transactional analysis create a transactional space in which the consultant and the organization together are able to reenact, bring into awareness, make sense of, and ultimately transform and integrate the organization's and its representatives' destructive and unhelpful ways of relating to self and others. Often these ways of relating have their roots in the organization's earliest and often unconscious object relationships as marked by the history of founders and other organizational heroes (see Hofstede, 1991). As a means of achieving this transformation and integration, the consultant not only observes but also participates in the organization's relational world, actively reenacting the many and varied aspects of these object relationships as they occur in the process between them. To do this, the relational consultant makes himself or herself available to be affected and influenced by the organization's transference reactions toward him or her and to use his or her countertransference responses to what is happening to understand and make meaning of these reenactments (see Fowlie, 2005). Then the consultant intervenes, bringing parts of his or her internal world out as a way of making meaning of where the organization is at the time. This inner world is often made up of the complex emotions (love, hate, attraction, disgust) the consultant feels toward the client, and the consultant is permanently challenged with regard to how to restrain or express that part of himself or herself.

Interventions at a group-level perspective are difficult for members in an organization and thus are often resisted. Even when the consultant brings himself or herself into the interaction, there is still an experience of "double deprivation" (Tarachow, 1963). The intervention uncovers the unconscious alliance; this is often experienced as being "caught," and there is an implicit agreement that the consultant will not

collude with that behavior even though he or she might be affected by it. Be reminded that organizational interventions are never meant to be therapeutic; rather, they are pedagogic, that is, designed “to increase individuals’ and groups’ understanding for their covert dynamics, to enable them to be more task effective, more humane, more competent and better leaders and followers” (Wells, 1995, p. 82).

The consultant’s self-disclosure, in which he or she reveals aspects of his or her counter-transferential experience of the organization, is a crucial tool for possibly transforming the organization. Finding the total that is more than the sum of the parts means that the relational consultant will include himself or herself in the process first and then look for the third subjectivity that is cocreated by the consultant and the client-organization. Locating pathology in the organization, leaving the consultant safely out of the focus, turns out to be reductionistic and not helpful. When the consultant enters this relational space by naming what is cocreated from his or her own experience, he or she actually supports understanding within the organization of the dynamics for which the organization may have to take ownership. Winnicott (1965/1987) is famously quoted as saying, “There is no such thing as a baby . . . [there is] a *baby and someone*” (p. 88). The mother helps to integrate the infant’s being, and this relational process is the key of this object relationship, more than the object itself. The role of the consultant is similar as the signifier of transformation, who, while working in relationship with a client-organization, supports the organization in integrating its ways of relating into its way of being.

Case Example

I once consulted with a mid-sized production company that had recently gone through some structural changes. For almost a year, the company had had a new CEO and a rather new team of senior managers. However, the organization struggled and was stuck with its internal process and procedures. Among other interventions, we agreed to have a biweekly reflection session with a steering group consisting of seven people who represented key areas of

management and staff. The task of these meetings was to explore organizational dynamics in the here and now and reflect on how these might represent current organizational issues. My role as a consultant was to support this task by bringing in my own experience in the here and now.

From the beginning of the process there was tension in the room. Intensive talking and exchanging occurred without a specific direction. About half of the group felt skeptical about the task, whereas the others were excited about the opportunity to explore beyond the obvious. They soon developed into two camps, thus creating a “sceptics”—“positivos” pairing and splitting in the room. They felt energized by that polarity but were, in fact, in a basic assumption mode and not really working on the task. I thought that this pairing dynamic was a way of acting out, and I was aware of upwelling tension in me physically. I feared that I was supposed to be the referee when they started fighting, and I did not like that idea. I felt a strong drive to side with the positivos, making it a bit safer for myself and for them. I said, “I sense the energy of the polarity in the room, and it seems to me that the two parties might soon need a UN peacekeeper. I am not sure that I want to take that role. How is it for you to feel so energized by creating these opposites?”

The group initially felt “caught” by my comments because they mirrored so closely the group’s dynamics. As group members talked about how much they used to act like that, with a good deal of anecdotal evidence, I felt increasingly sad and compassionate toward them for their inability to connect differently. The talking gradually decreased; it seemed to reach some sort of balance, but nothing moved. It was as if the energy of acting out dried up and left the group with increasing emptiness.

The silences got longer, which made it harder to sit with the process. They spoke about the discomfort of silence and that our process did not seem to be going so well; gradually the group turned more and more to me. They were not so much against me, but more seeking support and relief. I felt as if I must fill up the silence and do something to make them all feel

better. I had a sense of sitting on the boundary and holding these struggling seven people, who appeared increasingly sad to me in the context of the struggling organization. I did not sit easy on my chair, I felt my heart pounding and the urge to jump in, but I held myself back, leaving the space open for exploring their sense of dependency on me and my wish to act on it.

Eventually, instead of interpreting that the group was in a dependent state, I said, "I am experiencing this urge in me to do something soothing for all of you, and I wonder where this might resonate in you." First there was silence, then the voices came back but in a different, more reflective tone. It became apparent that "yes, they wished me to be their caretaker, and, yes, if possible in the same way as the former CEO, who had left a year ago. . . ." The story that unfolded was about the much-loved CEO, who had been caring, uniting, contactful, approachable, and available. He brought opposites together and handled conflict. He was, in fact, their peacekeeper. Under stakeholder pressure, he was fired by the board because the company's profits were too low. It became clear that (many in) the organization were actually still grieving the loss of this good object (now replaced by bad objects), and it became the first piece of understanding something about the internal "stuckness" in the organization. Once this issue had come out and was owned by the steering group, it became possible to bring it further into the organization, moving it from being denied to being dealt with. As the meetings continued, many more pieces of understanding followed, which helped the organization to unravel its hidden and unconscious dynamics.

Conclusion

Developments in relational transactional analysis provide an opportunity for organizational transactional analysts to review their understanding and use of psychoanalytic and group relations perspectives, concepts, and ways of working, especially working relationally. This approach requires that the consultant not collude with the myth of controllability but rather humbly work with the complexity of unconscious processes as they unfold in the organization.

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