
The work is alive! Systems psychodynamics and the pursuit of pluralism without polarization in human relations

human relations

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DOI: 10.1177/00187267221089208

journals.sagepub.com/home/hum



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Abstract

This article celebrates the vitality of the systems psychodynamic approach and its potential to humanize organization studies, management practice, and working lives. An approach is a deliberate movement: a way to move closer to, inquire about, and deal with something. The systems psychodynamic approach involves moving closer to organizations and workers through research and educational efforts to study and manage the unconscious dynamics of organizing. It aims to reveal the fears, needs, and wishes that underpin rigid structures and dysfunctions in groups, organizations, and institutions—and to foster more adaptive and functional ways of dealing with those impulses. Advocates refer to this approach as ‘the work’. This article tells the story of the work as we understand it. We tell it as a life, to highlight the work’s intent and evolution, its struggles and contributions, but mostly to make the point that the work is alive. It is alive as an academic enterprise and it is a way of life. An approach devoted to dismantling defenses, countering authoritarianism, and nurturing development and democracy, we argue, is more relevant than ever. And so is what we see as the purpose of the work: fostering pluralism without polarization in human relations.

Keywords

holding environment, human relations, management history, organization theory, social defenses, systems psychodynamic

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Those who are into it just call it ‘the work’. Maybe because it is too cumbersome to say, using a systems psychodynamic approach to study, consult to, and help people learn about the unconscious dynamics of groups, organizations, and institutions. Or to explain that it involves working closely with colleagues, informants, and clients to understand how the fears, needs, and wishes of individuals give meaning and shape to collectives, and how those collectives inform and influence the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of their members in turn. Maybe because it is too ambitious to say that it demands intellectual curiosity and emotional fitness to grapple with how experience gets organized, how motives and relations shape selves and institutions, all to bring about change to organizations and to the people who inhabit them. Or maybe because these formulations of an approach to scholarship, consulting, and education—to learning from lived experiences, in a certain place, at a certain time, with others who share the same place and time—do not fully capture ‘the work’.

The work is more than a vital academic enterprise. It is a way of life. It is not just an evolving interpretation of the unconscious motives that sustain the persistence of dysfunctional organizations and the popularity of irrational leaders. It takes more than culling insights from experience that might lead to a new concept or theory, a change in structures or procedures, or a different way of managing oneself and others. Learning from experience, sparking insight into the irrational, bringing about adaptive changes, are only means. The end is developing capacity, within and between people, so that pluralism—of intentions, identities, and ideologies—does not devolve into polarization. The work is helping people live more spacious lives and build more spacious organizations. The work is making space for integration. Being in that space, being into the work, is the best way to learn about it.

This article uses the life cycle as a metaphor to outline the evolving character and circumstances of the work, a body of theory and practice, as hosted and represented by this journal. Following the work through its tumultuous birth, its defiant youth, its caring adulthood, and its mid-life crisis, we attempt to bring into focus its intent. That is, the lives it has been trying to foster and the organizations it has been trying to build. Our purpose in focusing on the work’s intent is to celebrate its vitality and highlight its enduring potential. Seventy-five years into its life, we argue, the work is as alive as ever and it is needed more than ever. It is needed to oppose the forces of fragmentation and fundamentalism threatening the cohesion of workplaces and communities, and the well-being of their members. It is needed to answer calls to study the functional management of tensions such as ambivalence for individuals and hybridity for organizations. Defying these forces and containing these tensions has been the purpose of the work all along. And even if workplaces might have changed from those in which this work was first conceived, the work continues to be rooted in human relations.

There could not be a systems psychodynamic approach without human relations. And arguably, there might not be one without *Human Relations*. The bonds through which people come into the world, deal with the world, and organize the world, that is, and this journal. Human relations are the principal medium and mystery of systems psychodynamic work, the terrain it explores and cultivates. The work involves theorizing through human relations about human relations. It has long aimed to understand the challenges of

human relations, at work and beyond, while helping to make relations more human. The same scholars who pioneered the work also founded this journal, to make a home for their vision that integrating the social sciences would improve organization theory, management practice, and working lives. Once it is established, Gabriel (2010) notes, a journal becomes ‘a place where things happen or fail to happen’ (p. 758). What has happened in *Human Relations*, then, can be read as a representation of the vicissitudes and development of systems psychodynamic work.

A tumultuous birth

The founding of *Human Relations* marked the end of the beginning for the approach to working with, and theorizing about, organizations known as ‘systems psychodynamic’. This approach was conceived during and after the Second World War through the collaboration of a pioneering group of clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and industrial psychologists who labored amidst undeniable existential threat. Recruited to assist the Allies’ war efforts, Wilfred Bion, Eric Trist, Kurt Lewin, and their associates had reason to believe that their lives, the lives of others, the success of their organizations, and the viability of their societies, depended on their work. The experiences of helping soldiers recover from trauma, selecting officers who would lead men in combat against the Nazi forces, and reinforcing democratic systems led these pioneers to articulate a radical new way to comprehend the existential significance of work and the vital function of organizations, and an approach to managing and organizing that, they believed, could make the rise of totalitarianism and outbreak of a global conflict less likely to happen again (Bridger, 1990; Trist and Murray, 1990).

We have reviewed elsewhere (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020) how the circumstances of its conception shaped the principles of the systems psychodynamic approach, which include:

. . . a consideration of how unconscious forces affect human functioning, a focus on the interaction between individual and collective levels of analysis, a participative stance toward the production of theory and change in the field, and a subversive intent, both of the authority of detached scientists and that of repressive leaders and bureaucratic organizations. (p. 414)

What we wish to emphasize here is how those circumstances forged a sensitivity to leading, working, and organizing as matters of life or death, and a conviction that fighting oppression and strengthening bonds were the best ways to keep people and societies alive. Since its origin, the systems psychodynamic approach has retained this existential sensitivity and political stance. At its core, we contend, the work is an expression of combative care.

The spirit of combative care transpires in the relations that systems psychodynamic scholars and practitioners, from the founders onwards, have forged with the fields they studied, intervened in, and sought to contribute to. The pioneers of the work, for example, faced skepticism from the military brass, who feared that their experiments in participative management, meant to help traumatized soldiers recover their agency and to

help select more resilient officers, would foster more insubordination than commitment (Bridger, 1990). They encountered similar reactions from the clinical and industrial psychologies of their times, as their insights built on and yet challenged both fields (Burnes and Cooke, 2013; Dicks, 2014).

From clinical psychology in general, and psychoanalysis in particular, early systems psychodynamic scholars borrowed Freud's (1900, 1929) idea that identification is 'the operation . . . whereby the human subject is constituted' (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973: 206). The necessity of sociality and the inevitability of power, Freud observed, ended up defining people. Growing up, children internalized external powers in the social world (say, a parent or a mentor) and rendered them models and censors in their inner world. Identification, seen this way, was far more than a cognitive association. It was a 'fundamental and visceral connection' (Ashforth et al., 2008: 359), a truce of sorts in a battle between wishes for recognition and demands for subordination that organized selves and relations.

Casting identification as a necessity and a constraint, as an avenue for individual development and for cultural reproduction, psychoanalysis offered a theory of power, or more precisely, a theory of conflicting powers—the power of desires and the power of institutions. Identification bound people together by helping them claim thoughts, feelings, and acts deemed appropriate by a group and repress those not consonant with it. In doing so, however, it pitted selves and groups against each other. To become 'this' often involves committing to not being 'that', which easily devolves into being against 'that' and soon after against 'them' (Bion, 1961; Wells, 1985). (The unconscious, seen this way, is a generic name for disowned self-definitions.) Identification, in this view, set up a perpetual inner struggle between overtly dutiful and covertly desiring selves, and frequent social struggles between different groups. The former could lead to rigidity and the latter to conflict, both of which psychoanalysis regards as defensive ways to deal with the tensions that living entails (Bion, 1962; Cramer, 1998; Freud, 1936). Supporting people's growth and sociality, then, required helping them question frustrating injunctions and dangerous prejudices internalized in childhood, which often became inflexible templates for being and relating as adults (Freud, 1912, 1915).

Early systems psychodynamic scholars embraced these ideas—and the ambivalence towards socialization implicit in them (Freud, 1929; Phillips, 2014). Those pioneers, however, challenged the traditional psychoanalytic concern with early socialization in the family of origin and shifted their focus to the groups that people lived and worked in (Czander and Eisold, 2003; Smith and Berg, 1987). Adults' well-being and cooperation, they observed, depended on their workplaces and communities as much as on their early influences. Authorities in all those spaces could promote oppression, frustration, and radicalization as much as free expression, active participation, and collective deliberation (Bion, 1946, 1948a). Helping people take on repressive powers and take up power reflexively was as important in the workplace as it was in the consulting room.

From industrial psychology in general, and open systems theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1950) in particular, early systems psychodynamic scholars borrowed the assumption that adaptive organizing entailed putting people in the conditions to scan their environment and respond in ways that helped the organization fulfil its task. If organizations were

open systems, monitoring and managing what happened at their boundaries was crucial to their survival and functioning (Miller, 1959; Miller and Rice, 1967). Failing to recognize, understand, or respond to changes in its environment could cause dysfunction and demise (Diamond et al., 2004). So why did that failure occur so often? To understand it, systems psychodynamic scholars challenged the view that organizations were tools to maximize productivity and achieve economies of scale. Organizations were not just machineries, they argued. They were communities as well. Nothing was ever ‘just business’ (Driver, 2003). Organizations gave people a place in the world, an identity as members, and people, in turn, resisted changes that displaced them. To remain adaptive and productive, then, organizations needed to invest in giving people access to dignified and meaningful work, resources to do it, and a say in how their work was done (Trist and Bamforth, 1951; Trist and Murray, 1990). And to develop such organizations, scholars and managers had to defy ‘authoritarian institutions and the prevailing bureaucratic culture’ (Bridger, 1990: 86).

These insights were theoretical leaps, and perhaps paradigm shifts, for two fields. They took up what Kalleberg (1989) would later describe as a ‘central task’ for the sociology of work. That is, ‘the linking of macro and micro levels of analysis, the relating of work structures and contexts to the biographies and experiences of individual workers’ (p. 591). They also expressed ‘an affirmation of the developmental and reparative potential of work and the belief that one of the most important gratifications of adult life is the ability to work well’ (Krantz, 2010: 193). In doing so, they advanced a humanistic agenda in (and through) organization theory and management practice. If organizations made people and the other way around, developing people, enhancing their well-being, productivity, and cooperation, required democratizing organizations. And vice versa. Ignoring these imperatives meant colluding with oppressive, and potentially totalitarian impulses lurking underneath a pseudo-scientific focus on scholarly objectivity and efficient productivity (Petriglieri, 2020a).

Since the beginning of systems psychodynamic work, the scholarly was political. ‘Responsible self-regulation and freedom from oppression, democracy and self-determination of working arrangements, and fair treatment and dignity for all in the workplace’ (Pasmore and Khalsa, 1993: 557) were the values that animated the work. Proponents of this approach recognized that ‘personal and societal values are deeply embedded in what researchers study, how they study it, what conclusions are drawn, how their work is used’ (Berg and Smith, 1985: 231; see Alderfer, 1985). Even theorizing about ‘organizational defenses and encouraging multiple interpretations’, Jarrett and Vince (2017) note, is ‘a political act in that it involves intervening in prevailing power relations’ (p. 52).

The pioneers of the work were not content to understand or critique the world. They approached organizations and working lives, that is, moved closer to them, to understand them better and change them for good. And to better take on those who stood in their way. Research was a contact sport. One can see this approach to scholarship as a social service, in Lewin’s famous quote that ‘there is nothing as practical as a good theory’ (1951: 169). In Bion’s (1962) view that the value of a concept does not depend on ‘whether a particular usage is right or wrong, meaningful or verifiable, but whether it does, or does not, promote development’ (p. 80). In Trist’s close colleagues’ statement that he was ‘a humanist first and a scientist second, not out of any shortcomings in his

scientific abilities, but out of the recognition that knowledge and values and action are interdependent' (Pasmore and Khalsa, 1993: 566). Theories, in short, needed to be grounded, actionable, and enlivening.

Such views did not just challenge the rigid organizations that early systems psychodynamic scholars most often studied and consulted to. They challenged academic establishments dominated, then as now, by views of social scientists as dispassionate and objective observers of human affairs (Ghoshal, 2005). More so than the methodological challenges of theorizing about unconscious patterns, or their reliance on action research, it might have been their combative care, a 'stance deliberately subversive in institutions devoted to instrumentality' (Petriglieri, 2020a: 5), that pushed systems psychodynamic scholars to the margins of the fields from which they started (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020). That place, which proved troubling and generative, was where they made their homes.

Institutionally, these homes initially took the form of two organizations—The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London, founded by Eric Trist and Wilfred Bion, and the Research Centre for Group Dynamics at MIT, in Cambridge, MA, founded by Kurt Lewin. Both institutes grew out of what Lewin described as 'two needs or necessities, a scientific one and a practical one' (Lewin, 1949: 126). The scientific need was to integrate sociology and psychology to understand how groups and organizations functioned (or failed to). The practical need, as we noted above, was to help organizations tackle problems of morale and alienation in the postwar reconstruction period (Burnes and Cooke, 2013). One year after founding their institutes, witnessing the academic establishment's resistance to their intellectual agenda of integration, methodological agenda of participation, and political agenda of democratization, Trist and Lewin decided that a new academic journal was needed. A journal that would host those intertwined agendas. *Human Relations* was born.

The journal claimed to be working 'towards the integration of the social sciences' on its front page, and the editorial policy published in the first issue stated that it would address 'community problems' and 'interpersonal and inter-group tensions' (*Human Relations*, 1947: 1). (Human relations, it seems, were mostly troubling back then. More on this later.) The logic of combining psychoanalysis with field theory, and noted above, was sound. Look beneath an organization's failure to adapt, systems psychodynamic theories posited, and you will often find its members' compulsion to repeat (Bibring, 1943; Shapiro and Carr, 1991). Workplaces, at worst, became stages where people unconsciously replicated patterns of behavior learned in childhood (Diamond and Allcorn, 1987, 2003; Levinson, 1987) and, if they had power, turned inner conflicts into social strife (Smith, 1989). At best, however, work and workplaces could help people transcend the constraints and preconceptions of early socialization. They could be harbingers of pluralism and bulwarks against polarization. People needed to be liberated from the oppression of the past and of their surroundings to focus on their work and on the challenges and opportunities their organizations faced in the present (French and Simpson, 2010). That would make organizations more adaptive, and more adaptive organizations, in turn, would pose less constraints on people. The promise was that productivity and emancipation could go hand in hand (Petriglieri, 2020a).

A review of the journal's early years, compiled on its 70th anniversary, noted that:

. . . underlying both journal and [Tavistock] institute were two strands of work in particular, those of psychoanalysis associated with scholars such as Melanie Klein, and those of group dynamics and personality theory associated in particular with Wilfred Bion and Kurt Lewin. (Edwards, 2016: 1)

More than a third of the papers published in the first decade of *Human Relations* belonged to these two strands. They included Bion's accounts of his ground-breaking experiments with psychoanalytic group therapy (1948b, 1948c, 1949, 1950). Lewin's seminal work on the structure and dynamics of groups (Lewin, 1946, 1947). And Klein's (1959) conceptualization of projective identification and its function as a defense mechanism and as a means of communication, which would become a cornerstone of object relations and of systems psychodynamic theory (Gilmore and Krantz, 1985; Jaques, 1955; Petriglieri and Wood, 2003). The journal was instrumental in weaving those strands together into a fabric that Eric Miller, co-author of the foundational book *Systems of Organization* (Miller and Rice, 1967) would later name 'systems psychodynamic' (Fraher, 2004a; Neumann, 1999).

As a body of theory and a mode of inquiry, in summary, systems psychodynamic work was conceived in human relations and brought to life in *Human Relations*. The origin of *Human Relations* encompassed an expression of its founders' need for defiance and their wish for integration. It suited the systems psychodynamic approach to institutionalize that combination of sentiments. Combative care had made the work viable in the tumultuous circumstances of its birth and would come to define its character over the following decades.

A defiant youth

The combative care of systems psychodynamic work, forged in the battlefields and bureaucracies of the mid-20th century, was an evolution of the detached irreverence that psychoanalysis had brought a few decades before to late Victorian clinics and salons. As they left armchairs and couches to approach the world of work, systems psychodynamic scholars took with them the psychoanalytic faith in irreverent inquiry, a hopeful, playful side of the psychoanalytic project that redeems its seemingly grim view of human nature. The convictions that history, if thoroughly examined, need not be destiny. That free associations could be an antidote to forced affiliations. That despite early constraints and traumas, people might heal and grow, speak up instead of acting out, and learn to love and work anew. All it took was allies that would help people voice their needs and defy the powers that constrained their expression, within and all around them. But first, that ally would have to expose the covert workings, and even the appeal, of those oppressive powers. That effort led to some of the best-known systems psychodynamic theorizing.

Observing working relations up close, documenting the ways they informed people's thinking, affected their feelings, and guided their actions, systems psychodynamic scholars theorized that people followed leaders and joined organizations not only to get work done, but also to think, feel, and act in certain ways—and not in others. The theory goes as follows. The nature of the work and the challenges of work relations often provoke anxiety. Will I be harmed? Will I be heard? Will we fail? To defend themselves against

those concerns, people endow a leader, or aspects of an organization, such as, say, a procedure, with the power to protect them. Once they endow leaders and features of organizations with the function to provide a social defense mechanism, people become invested in keeping them in place. This investment explains why people justify leaders' erratic behavior and shield organizations from change even when they become irrational, oppressive, and unsuited to get work done.

Menzies' (1960) classic study of a training hospital, published in this journal, was the first empirical illustration of such a social defense. She started from a classic focus of psychodynamic inquiry: fixation. That is, the compulsive repetition of a dysfunctional pattern. Instead of an individual behavior, however, Menzies focused on a collective pattern: the organization of nurses' rotations. Much like a neurotic symptom, members of the hospital kept complaining about the work allocation system, which was dramatically dysfunctional. Frequent changes between wards stopped nurses from getting to know their patients, which in turn reduced the quality of patient care and increased the nurses' feelings of alienation and turnover intentions. Everyone, it seemed, was worse off for it. And yet (here comes the irrationality) there was little appetite for change. Organizational members seemed intent on staging the drama, so to speak, by keeping in place the very system that kept them stuck. Such stuckness, Menzies theorized, was a form of resistance to change owing to the nurses' unconscious investment in the rotation process as a social defense. The system stopped nurses from getting too close to patients whom they would have to witness suffer and at times die.

Menzies' study is paradigmatic of the systems psychodynamic emphasis on revealing the 'function of dysfunction' (Kahn, 2012) and it has generated a stream of research on the covert rationales of seemingly irrational organizing practices that members often decry and yet refuse to change (Hirschhorn, 1988; Krantz, 2010; Long, 2006). These studies suggest that people often collude with power structures and organizational processes that give them an illusion of stability (Vince, 2002), comfort (Baum, 2002; Fraher, 2004b), choice (Fotaki, 2006), hope (Ekman, 2013; Fotaki and Hyde, 2015; Fraher and Gabriel, 2014), or fairness (Padavic et al., 2020) at a high price. Commitment to social defenses makes it hard to think critically and entertain contradictions. It narrows minds and weakens bonds.

Menzies' study contains an idea that runs across systems psychodynamic scholarship: Depersonalized work relations are common, albeit alienating, because they protect against the anxieties of human relating. Looming fears of being rejected, misunderstood, ignored, betrayed, upset, and so on. Fear of intimacy and fear of loss. But in preventing, or more precisely denying, those worries, social defenses dehumanize individuals and diminish organizations' ability to accomplish their task. The prices for dealing with anxiety in a defensive fashion, in short, are individual oppression and organizational rigidity.

This theory was a product of irreverent inquiry, an unwillingness to take the necessity of a certain system for granted, and in turn provided the rationale for the defiance evident in systems psychodynamic practices informed by it. The Second World War was over, but the pioneer's fight for freedom from oppression continued in the workplace. Its weapons against the tyranny of 'scientific' management were consulting and educational interventions that systems psychodynamic scholars advocated for, experimented with,

and studied (Gabriel, 1998; Petriglieri, 2020a). The former involved devolving authority and affording autonomy to workers. The latter involved helping people become more conscious of the anxieties that autonomy and relating at work entail, and more capable of dealing with it. In short, helping workers in general, and managers in particular, care. It was caring management in democratic organizations that systems psychodynamic scholars fought to bring and keep into the world, with the understanding that management was a function that could—and should—be taken up by many and even by all, not just a role reserved to the few (Miller and Rice, 1967).

Trist and Bamforth's (1951) classic study of a British coal mine, also published in this journal, provides an exemplary illustration of the above intent. Their research mirrors and complements Menzies' (1960) study. Instead of focusing on the persistence of a seemingly dysfunctional pattern, it focused on the rejection of a seemingly functional change. Applying the Lewin-ian (1951) principle that there is no better way to understand an organization than trying to change it, Trist and Bamforth (1951) set out to explain why the introduction of new coal extraction technology, meant to reduce workers' efforts and increase their efficiency, led to a rise in turnover and an unexpected drop in productivity instead. The study revealed that the mechanization of the work broke down social arrangements that afforded miners 'responsible autonomy'. Before the technology was introduced, miners worked in groups with high levels of trust and were responsible for organizing themselves to keep everyone safe and hit productivity targets. They had to manage with care. This arrangement made work meaningful. It gave them a sense of connection—to the work and to each other—and pride.

Building on this insight, in a series of papers that followed, Trist and colleagues went on to test and document the benefits of interventions that re-introduced autonomous working alongside mechanized operations (Rice, 1953; Rice and Trist, 1952; Rice et al., 1950). Trist's research teams (e.g. Trist et al., 1963, 1977) partnered with coal mines in the UK and US to compare teams whose members were given autonomy to organize and manage their work, solve arising problems, and take responsibility for safety with teams that did not have such ownership of the work. After training the miners to work in autonomous teams, the researchers tracked productivity, well-being, and safety. They found that compared with non-autonomous teams, self-managing ones had significantly lower rates of accidents, absenteeism, and cost of extraction per ton of coal. The intervention proved so popular that 'control' teams lobbied the mine's management to become autonomous before the experiment was complete. Soon, the miner's unions and the management reached an agreement to reorganize the entire mine accordingly.

The juxtaposition of these studies reveals a central feature of systems psychodynamic scholarship: a skeptical optimism about human relations. If people easily colluded in ways of working, relating, and organizing that constrained their selves and their work, given the right conditions, they could cooperate to form relationships, and build organizations, that soothed their anxiety, freed them up, and improved their productivity. Development, then, is the process of cultivating a multiple self and cultivating differences in relationships. It requires re-claiming parts of the self that one had lodged onto others, and returning parts that others had forced onto one's self. The result is conflicted selves with more peaceful relations. If social strife is often a way to avoid inner conflict, integration fosters compassion. One can read systems psychodynamic work as the effort

to make selves and relations more spacious, hence more human, revealing how organizations constrain selves and relations and working to reshape them into spaces that can contain a broader variety of selves and relations. Indeed, fostering a 'new reflective capacity within organizations' (Arnaud, 2012: 1128) is a key contribution of systems psychodynamic consulting and coaching (Kilburg, 2004).

The effort to build reflective capacity is also evident in educational methods informed by systems psychodynamic theories. Group relations conferences (French and Vince, 1999; Rice, 1965) and human interaction laboratories (Kleiner, 1996) aim to help people learn from experience, respectively, how unconscious attempts to manage emotions can settle systems into shape and push people into roles, and how to be more sensitive to the views and needs of members of one's group. These educational efforts are intertwined with research and consulting. They aim to help people increase their ability to learn from, and put words to, their experiences in groups. Cultivating such capacities for self-reflection and interpersonal care, is the assumption, makes it less likely that anxiety needs to be dealt with in a defensive manner (Miller, 1993). It is worth noting that the work, in line with every strand of psychoanalysis, considers defense mechanisms to be anti-learning because they prevent insight into the thoughts and feelings that are being defended against (Argyris, 1990; Brown and Starkey, 2000). One needs defiance to let insight emerge. Insight is necessary, in turn, to sustain one's defiance. This assumption has led some to regard systems psychodynamic scholarship as a critical tradition more than an interpretive one (Fotaki et al., 2012, 2017). But defiance and insight are only possible with the challenge and support of caring others. Like research, self-awareness also is a contact sport.

Growing up to care

The juxtaposition of Menzies' and Trist and Bamforth's classic studies, and the focus on learning from experiences in consultations and conferences, also highlights the contribution of systems psychodynamic work to a relational turn in psychodynamic scholarship more broadly. It was around the time those studies appeared that psychoanalysis started regarding human relations as the solution to individual troubles at least as much as the origins of those troubles. Early scholars had inherited Freud's mistrust of institutions, amplified by their confrontation with a totalitarian regime. The work of crafting organization theories while defying oppressive (and defensive) arrangements had kept them alive and given them a life. But something else was happening in clinical and consulting circles (for a review, see Petriglieri, 2020b). Thanks to Winnicott's (1975a, 1975b) groundbreaking work, scholars began to realize what truly advanced their emancipation project. It was not the interpretations about early identifications or defensive routines offered from behind the couch or in corporate circles. It was the containment that their presence and their interventions' structure provided. Having built the theoretical foundations for their combativeness, systems psychodynamic scholars turned towards theorizing the workings and value of care.

Containment occurs when the context 'absorb(s), filter(s), or manage(s) difficult or threatening emotions or ideas—the contained—so that they can be worked with' (French and Vince, 1999: 9). Containment tempers disturbing affect and releases people's capacity to process and integrate unpleasant experiences rather than deploying

defenses such as denying, splitting, and projecting unpalatable psychological elements onto others (Petriglieri and Stein, 2012; Smith, 1989). When containment is available, people can trade valuable fictions for uncomfortable truths, tolerate diverging views, and experiment with a way of relating, and a future, different from the familiar past (Shapiro and Carr, 1991). Containment is particularly powerful when it is provided not just by an individual, but by a broader ‘relational system’, a community in which members:

. . . share their experiences of crises and process their emotions, which give way to narratives that help them make sense of their altered realities. Those narratives can provide meaningful contexts, as well as the possibility of hope, in which to envision desirable futures. (Kahn et al., 2013: 391; Van Buskirk and McGrath, 1999)

Seen this way, organizations become irrational when they fail to contain.

Winnicott (1960) called spaces that provide containment, as well as some explanation for one’s experiences, ‘holding environments’. While he never provided a definition, focusing instead on children’s experiences in them, we have deduced that a holding environment can be defined that as ‘a social context that reduces disturbing affect and facilitates sensemaking’ (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010: 44), and that it can be interpersonal as well as institutional. To a bereaved worker, for example, the holding provided by a colleague’s visit can be as valuable as that provided by a generous compassionate leave policy (Petriglieri and Maitlis, 2019). Holding environments are fundamental for human development throughout one’s life (Kegan, 1982). Only in the context of such environments can people, as Winnicott (1975a: 297) put it, take ‘the risks involved in starting to experience living’. (Defenses, seen this way, are ways to stay alive without experiencing living, because it feels too risky to do so). Taking such risks requires consciousness and care, and spaces where both can be cultivated. It was not enough, then, to understand the appeal of oppressive regimes that dehumanize workers, or even to defy them. Scholars, and managers, should take another step. Care to make organizations hospitable to human development and expression (Foster, 2001; Kahn, 1993).

Ideally, such hospitable organizations would not indulge people’s tendency to identify with leaders whose promises and processes invited them to deny uncertainty and anxiety, but would help their members acknowledge, live with, and learn from the anxieties involved in their work, and in their choices of what work to do and how (Hirschhorn, 1999, 2021). They would help people to be ‘fully there’, in the formulation of another landmark paper published in this journal (Kahn, 1992). Being present to one’s experience, to one’s coworkers and clients, to one’s surrounding, Kahn’s noted, was the fullest possible way to occupy one’s role in a collective, the freest and most caring. It was also hard work, because it involved ‘the experience of being vulnerable, taking risks, and feeling anxiety’ (1992: 324). That is the demand of more adaptive and democratic organizations: they require maturity, the psychological capacity to handle more uncertainty, more turmoil, and most of all, more dissonance within and between people. If early systems psychodynamic scholars had learned that groups needed to hold tight in a fight, later ones realized that avoiding a fight required holding tight at scale. It was in this journal that Winnicott published his thesis on democracy (1950) as a collective holding

environment. Democratic organizations, he argued, are mature organizations because they lead to the ‘psychiatric health’ (p. 176) of their members, which in turn makes those members functioning and productive as workers and citizens. Work, work organizations, and work relationships could be harbingers of development and progress. And building such organizations required leaders who embodied a spacious stance rather than peddling a narrow view. Unfortunately, such leaders appeared few and far between.

The last part of the 20th century saw early work, focused on the dysfunctions of bureaucratic organizing and the opportunities of democratic forms, on the appeal of the former and the demands of the latter, give way to a focus on leaders and their dysfunctions. This shift reflected a rise of interest in leaders in the scholarly and popular press (Walsh, 2020) that, Kniffin and colleagues (2020) have found, reflects an endemic fascination with the idea of leadership, or with the label of leader (Learmonth and Morrell, 2017). We have examined this shift elsewhere (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2015) in relation to the dismantling of traditional social contracts between organizations and members. When workers no longer trusted organizations to keep them safe and growing, they would turn to leaders who promised to do so. And when managers saw their authority threatened by frequent delayering and reorganizations, they would turn to leadership to keep them in charge. Organizations receded into the background, cast less as the ground from which leaders grew and more as the product of leaders’ often neurotic psyches (Kets de Vries, 1984).

Particularly notable in this stream of work is research illustrating the risks of leaders’ narcissism, amplified by the power of their role, to their judgment and followers (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1985; Maccoby, 2000). Kets de Vries’ (1996) classic study of the ‘anatomy’ of an entrepreneur, an in-depth account of one leader’s psychoanalysis, is an excellent example of this work. Others are Stein’s studies of the collapses of Long Term Capital Management (LTCM; Stein, 2003) and Enron (Stein, 2007). All three appeared in this journal. Building on the case of the failed hedge fund, Stein (2003) theorized how leaders imprint their narcissism on the culture of their organizations. The two Nobel-prize winning economists who led LTCM built a culture of risk taking, embodying a belief that the firm rested on so much intelligence that it was invincible, impermeable to market forces. The result was a failure of such scale that it almost brought down the global financial sector.

The concern with the inner world of popular and yet disturbed, dysfunctional, and often disruptive leaders, might appear a return to Freud’s (1921) preoccupation with the harm leaders could wreak while promising illusory deliverance from threats and anxiety. It was such leaders, whose power depended on people’s worries about an external enemy or a looming threat (Gabriel, 1997; Zaleznik, 1966), who benefited most from defensive organizational arrangements and often kept them in place (Padavic et al., 2020). Fighting them was not enough. Helping leaders to renounce narrow and dangerous states of mind—through coaching, and other forms of support—so that they would not project onto others feelings and thoughts that they could not handle, became the concern of systems psychodynamic scholars (Petriglieri and Stein, 2012; Simpson et al., 2002).

On the one hand, some saw the focus on the ‘leadership mystique’ (Kets de Vries, 1994) as a retreat from theorizing about collectives to a more traditional territory for psychoanalysis—investigations of individuals’ inner world and the origins of character

(Schein, 2015). That is, the very focus that this journal had been founded to transcend (Gemmil and Oakley, 1992; Krantz and Gilmore, 1990). On the other hand, a concern with humanizing leaders complements the concern with democratizing organizations (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2015). One effort requires the other, and both reinforce each other. Both streams of research and practice share a view of organizations as transitional phenomena of sorts. Like Winnicott's (1975b) teddy bear, organizations are real and illusory at once in this view. Leaders use them to express their frustration and mold reality in the shape of their wishes (Armstrong, 1997). The two streams also share the idea that participatory management is an antidote to leaders' defensive rigidity, and to the oppressive use of organization (Kernberg, 1979). If there is enough containment, they concur, there can be genuine sanity, not only a deceptive safety, in numbers. But just when systems psychodynamic work had managed to pay attention to both collective and individual sources of defensive irrationality and development potential, its container proved unable to hold on to both, at least for a while.

A mid-life crisis (are you not entertained?)

Papers associated with systems psychodynamic work were a third of those published in the first decade of *Human Relations*, but the fraction had shrunk significantly by its fifth. This might have partly been owing to the journal's success and its resulting appeal to a broader set of scholars. But it also reflected a moment, by the turn of the century, in which the work appeared to be going through a mid-life crisis. In a special issue of the journal published in 1999 to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the Tavistock Institute, the editors remarked on 'the limited degree to which those working with psychodynamic theories have managed to also relate to organizational theories, and vice versa' (Neumann and Hirschhorn, 1999: 683). The promise of integrating the social sciences had given way to a fragmented academic landscape, in which scholars from different perspectives claimed space more than they tried to make or share space. What struck the editors, they elaborated, was 'that there is neither one theory of psychodynamics nor one theory of organizations—they are competing theories around which researchers and practitioners shape their identities' (p. 690). Meanwhile, the social psychology that evolved from Lewin's work appeared more focused on cognitions than on the ways emotions shaped how people made sense of their experiences. Organization theory, of which Trist had been a forefather, had veered towards the ways institutions shape relatively powerless actors and organizational fields. Even critical studies, focused on the ways dominant discourses shaped people's selves, came to take their cue from Foucault more than Bion (Frosh, 2003). The unconscious had been pushed to the 'periphery of organizational theorizing' once more (Fotaki et al., 2012: 1106; Pratt and Crosina, 2016).

We came on the academic scene around this time, from the fields of psychiatry and organizational consulting, falling in love with the work and each other in short order. Our first collaboration was on a conceptual paper about organizations as identity workspaces. The concept built on Menzies' theory of social defenses and Winnicott's on holding environments (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). While helping protect them from anxiety, we argued, arrangements regarded as social defenses also help people learn who they are. Menzies' nurses were learning what being a nurse meant and how to become one.

The machine in Trist and Bamforth's mine threatened the meaning of being a miner (Carr, 1999). At the time of this writing, that paper is one of our most cited and the foundation of all we have written since. But when we submitted it to *Human Relations*, it was desk rejected. . . for lack of fit. Back then, one of the founders of systems psychodynamic work told us not to be surprised, as the journal had 'lost its soul'. The challenges, however, seemed to go beyond this journal. Around the same time, a senior organization theorist familiar with the work told us that a study of management development we were conducting would never be published in a top journal if we framed it as a systems psychodynamic one. (The study would appear in the *Administrative Science Quarterly*; Petriglieri et al., 2018.) Another established colleague mentioned that his advisor, a world-famous management scholar, had warned him to read Bion but never cite him. Scholars trained in systems psychodynamics, Ely (2020) has observed, often used this approach to conduct nuanced field studies without claiming it overtly. Even as we developed this article, explicitly devoted to celebrating its accomplishments and contributions, reviewers urged us to pay more attention to the criticism, and in some corners, outright dismissal, of systems psychodynamic work. An irreverent approach never gets far from threats of being irrelevant, it seems, especially in mid-life.

Stories like ours are common lore in the systems psychodynamic community. Accounts of scholars and practitioners feeling unheard, sidelined, diminished, and dismissed in the academy or at client sites, and keeping going against the mainstream, are often part of newcomers' socialization into the work. Some are even published. Alderfer (1985), for example, argued that the skepticism and hostility that the idea of the unconscious and those who study it often encounter in academia are:

. . .founded on a complex of fears, which are extraordinarily difficult for individual social scientists to acknowledge to themselves—let alone to critical colleagues. The cornerstone of this complex is that allowing for greater consciousness of their own experience would unleash powerful emotions—in others to be sure, but also in themselves. The next step is the belief that these emotions would get out of control and disrupt any realistic possibility of rational understanding . . . To cope with these fears, the regime in authority adopts repressive measures and resists mightily efforts to examine the fundamental bases of their assumptions. (p. 67)

Such tales are quiet reminders of the fate awaiting those who dare trying to give voice to the unconscious—a life of strife and a place at the margins. Over time, we have come to think of them as 'Gladiator stories'.

The appellation is a reference to a central scene in Ridley Scott's 2000 blockbuster movie *Gladiator*. The protagonist, played by Russel Crowe, is a Roman General caught in a political intrigue. Rather than being retired with honor after his service in the provinces, he is sold into slavery, taken to Rome in chains, and forced to fight as a gladiator in the Coliseum. Many special effects later, he is standing in the pit, having survived the scores of beasts and warriors unleashed upon him. He stares defiantly at the incredulous crowd on the stands. They have gone quiet. 'Are you not entertained?' he shouts, as the corrupt Emperor realizes that he has given his rival a chance to prove his skill and pride on the grandest stage in Rome. The scene, often turned into internet memes, is a cinematic illustration of what psychoanalysis refers to as the 'return of the

repressed' (Freud, 1900). That is, the idea that a disowned principle will often return in different form—as a slip or as a symptom—and claim its vitality in public. But from a systems psychodynamic perspective, Crowe's character is not repressed as much as oppressed—once he stops being entertainment, he is revealed as a threat to the establishment. The plot twist reveals instinct as equal to the institution that attempted to silence it, and it signals a moment of reckoning, an opening for change.

Gladiator stories in the systems psychodynamic community are scripts of sorts. These tales of professionals committed to not sacrificing subjectivity at the altar of academic legitimacy, facing ambivalence from an establishment enamored with the impersonal objectivity of the natural sciences, feeling ambivalent about that establishment in turn, and yet seeking acceptance from it while abjuring its principles, do not just describe a common fate. They prescribe that fate, too. The script harks back to an ambitious Jewish doctor in Vienna who rose to become one of the foremost public intellectuals of his time but retained the experience of being an outsider whose ideas were resisted, and built a psychology out of it (Phillips, 2014). It is a script lived out by Bion in the British Army, Jacques in the Glacier company, Trist in the mines, and many others since, including us. It is a script enacted each time a systems psychodynamic scholar, having faced, interpreted, and overcome resistance in their research or academic field, frames a paper with this trope: 'Theory X has proven inadequate to explain a phenomenon or change organizations. Here comes psychoanalysis to the rescue.' There is something seductive about the Gladiator script, and righteous, and damning too, and not long ago we decided to interrogate it rather than embrace it.

In an extensive review of the systems psychodynamic literature (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020) we concluded that the often observed, and occasionally romanticized, marginality of this approach is neither contemporary nor circumstantial. Although both have played a role, it is not just owing to a change in academic fashions, such as the well documented positivist turn in management and social studies after the Second World War (Khurana, 2007; Westen, 1998), or to an ignorance of recent developments in psychodynamic theory among many scholars, who still associate it to some of Freud's outdated ideas (Pratt and Crosina, 2016). We came to see marginality instead as constitutional, and to a certain degree, functional for systems psychodynamic work. (The unconscious, like the blues, can never be mainstream). Its struggles, we contended, are owing to its nature as a 'radical interpretivism' committed to a holistic view of individuals that challenges the scientific focus on discrete variables, and to a practical engagement in systems that goes beyond an intelligent critique of the status quo.

Whatever contributions systems psychodynamic scholars have been able to make, we have come to believe, may well have occurred because of, not despite, their marginality. Adam Phillips (2014) writes of efforts to tout the utility of psychoanalytic inquiry and render it more acceptable saying:

It is, indeed, dismaying how quickly psychoanalysis has become the science of the sensible passions, as though the aim of psychoanalysis was to make people more intelligible to themselves rather than realize how strange they are. When psychoanalysis makes too much sense, or makes sense of too much, it turns into the symptom it is trying to cure: defensive knowingness. (p. 87)

How could an approach to scholarly inquiry so suspicious of the function of private and collective theories be anything other than marginal? Where could it find its inspiration and insights if it was not? The point might have come to stop striving to improve the work's standing or popularity, renounce the fantasies of rightful superiority that often lurk beneath its gladiatorial tropes, and for one moment, be content and celebrate its existence and contribution. And there are reasons to celebrate.

Systems psychodynamic work has fared in management and organization studies like psychoanalysis has in clinical psychology. The more its ideas permeated workplace culture, with calls for self-awareness and adaptive organizing being so familiar to sound cliché, the less popular its theories seemed to be in academia. But as often happens with psychoanalysis, reports of its demise have proven to be premature. The last decade has seen a resurgence in systems psychodynamic studies. Numerous works using this approach, many of them empirical, have appeared in top American and European journals and cast light on novel or problematic features of organizations, organizing, and the organized (e.g. Anicich, forthcoming; Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Fotaki, 2013; Fotaki and Hyde, 2015; Handy and Rowlands, 2017; Kahn, forthcoming; Kenny, 2010; Kenny et al., 2020; Maitlis, forthcoming; Padavic et al., 2020; Petriglieri and Peshkam, forthcoming; Petriglieri et al., 2018, 2019; Prasad, 2014; Stein, 2011, 2013, 2016, 2021; Vince, 2019). After its mid-life crisis, the work is alive anew.

Personally, we felt a circle closing when we received an invitation to contribute this article to the special issue celebrating the 75th anniversary of *Human Relations*. But in keeping with a systems psychodynamic perspective, we believe that the change has less to do with our scholarly persistence than it has to do with the social context. A changing world of work requires explanation, defiance, and containment once more. There is much need for caring management and democratic organizations. Perhaps even more than in the aftermath of war.

Keeping the fight going, with care

The last several decades have seen profound changes in the relations between individuals and institutions. Relational social contracts have given way to more instrumental ties in many workplaces around the world (Long, 1999; Robinson et al., 1994). The combination of powerful market forces and pervasive information technologies have rendered work more precarious (Kalleberg, 2009), while the weakening of traditional institutions such as family or religion, has rendered work more significant as a source of self-definition (Baumeister, 1987; Putnam, 2000). Developing an identity grounded in solid affiliations has become increasingly difficult 'in a society composed of episodes and fragments' (Sennett, 1998: 26). Careers have become personal projects more than institutional endowments (Grey, 1994; Lane, 2011), for which the risks and responsibilities fall on individuals (Beck, 2000) and their loved ones (Petriglieri and Obodaru, 2019). Despite people's thirst for meaningful work, scholars find:

... little evidence that the new economy is moving in a direction that will ensure everyone will have opportunities to engage in meaningful work, will earn a comfortable income, or will have the resources to construct satisfactory lives outside of work. On the contrary, employer

practices and institutional arrangements continue to sustain—and sometimes even deepen—the chasms that separate workers from opportunity. (Sweet and Meiksins, 2013: 195; see also Blustein, 2019).

As we write, a global pandemic has been ravaging the planet for two years, and a gathering of world leaders is attempting to tackle an impending climate crisis of catastrophic proportions. The perniciousness of economic inequality (Piketty, 2014) and systemic racism (Feagin, 2013) has become impossible to ignore. Workers' mental health is a growing concern, but individual advice is much more easily offered than systemic solutions. A 'great resignation' is said to be under way (Lufkin, 2021), in which those jolted by the pandemic are changing jobs in droves, seeking more meaningful and rewarding work and ways of working. This novel buzzword, however, can also be read as a Freudian slip, an expression revealing the resignation that many felt towards meaningless work, impersonal organizations, and the world of work even before COVID-19 (Graeber, 2018). A world of work in which containment is ever more needed and less available (Kahn, 2001), or at least less evenly distributed, since corporate elites have become more impermeable, with positions secured and fates divorced from that of their companies' workers (Mizruchi, 2013). A world of work in which many of those workers feel betrayed, anxious, and alone, and are seduced by the appeal of populist leaders and political movements veering towards totalitarianism (Applebaum, 2020; Khaleelee, 2004). As the hold of organizations becomes looser and looser, and the grip of markets ever tighter, it seems, the threats of fragmentation and fundamentalism, which systems psychodynamic pioneers struggled to defy and contain, are back with a vengeance. And yet, from the rubble of traditional social contracts, in the shadow of weakened democratic systems, amidst growing personal discontent and collective strife, have risen some calls for engaged scholarship, humanistic practices, and holistic learning.

In academia, scholars are urged, at least on occasion, to follow their passion (Courpasson, 2013) and address the grand challenges of our time (George et al., 2016) with care, courage, and curiosity (Howard-Grenville, 2021). To develop psychological and organizational theories that challenge the fiction of an atomistic autonomy and unpeopled organizations. Theories that integrate the reality that 'emotional experiences do not merely represent reaction to institutions 'out there' but are complicit with the work of maintaining, disrupting, or creating institutions' (Voronov and Vince, 2012: 61). Theories that take human experience and relations seriously (Bechky, 2011), developed from living with, not looking at, people operating in the 'new world of work' (Ashford et al., 2018). These calls do not deny the persistence of traditional organizations and careers, in and outside the academy, but point scholars to growing segments of the workforce whose lives no longer resemble the 'petrified images of work' (Barley and Kunda, 2001: 82; see also Davis, 2015) conducted in rigid, bureaucratic institutions (Lee and Edmondson, 2017).

In management practice, at least some executives have taken to claiming that their companies are unlike those traditional institutions. They are genuine communities, as fond of their people as they are of their profits. They encourage people to bring their whole selves to work and develop bonds of friendship. Since most companies no longer promise loyalty, and people will not expect it, executives attempt to elicit commitment

with the promise of learning (Petriglieri and Peshkam, forthcoming). Statements that ‘the quest for business excellence and the search for personal realization need not be mutually exclusive—and can, in fact, be essential to each other’ (Kegan et al., 2014: 5) echo the view of systems psychodynamic pioneers. And at least some consulting firms are paying closer attention to the way structure affects people’s experience at work and of working (Dignan, 2019).

In education, the popularity of courses offering support in finding one’s calling and doing business in the service of social progress is on the rise. These courses, drawing heavily on the principles of experiential learning, attempt to foster reflective engagement with the systems one lives and work with (Petriglieri et al., 2011), cultivate judgment in context (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014), and question power structures (Sutherland et al., 2015). In doing so, they challenge management education’s focus on economic goals, which ‘disregard the indispensable question of what kind of world [managers] wish to live in and hope to leave behind’ and nudge them towards transcendent goals that ‘might deter the destructive decision making that creates less-desirable products and services and instigates ethically questionable approaches’ (Giacalone, 2004: 416).

Some have cast such calls to humanize organization theory, management practice, and management education, as rhetorical attempts that barely cover up those fields’ collusion with dehumanizing neoliberal imperatives (Adams, et al., 2019; Petriglieri, 2020a). Nevertheless, they raise the question of how to keep the promises of humanizing scholarship, organizing, and education, least the expectations those promises create turn into discontent. In addition, we contend that humanistic rhetoric and initiatives are borne of attempts to stave off the rising threats of fragmentation and fundamentalism, within and between people. They are expressions of the need for theories and practices that defy those forces and contain relations once more. A need that a systems psychodynamic approach is suited to help fulfil. Keeping these promises and fulfilling these needs requires one more developmental step in the life of the work, the kind that occurs after one has faced one’s limits and celebrated one’s presence. It involves letting go of some old preoccupations, holding on to some original concerns, and bringing together strands of one’s character into a harmonious whole. In short, it is time to bring combativeness and care closer, to be more useful and be useful some more.

Alderfer (1980) has drawn a useful distinction between over-bounded and under-bounded systems, such as, for example, strict hierarchies and loose occupational networks. While both might have always existed side by side in social systems, the focus of organizational scholars and management practitioners is shifting from the former to the latter. It was once more popular, and perhaps relevant, to study the effect of rigid, impersonal hierarchies on the ‘men and women of the corporation’ (Kanter, 1977). It has become more urgent to chronicle workers’ fate in the ‘vanishing corporation’ (Davis, 2016). Fluid, flatter, and less reliable organizations have different implications for human relations. While organizations in the ‘old’ world of work held a tight and often suffocating grip on members, organizations in the ‘new’ one, it seems, leave members fending for themselves in the face of unforgiving markets (Ashford et al., 2018). If unmanaged spaces in those tight workplaces were once valuable enclaves (Gabriel, 1995, 1999), the expansions of such spaces might render them sources of dread. While the old world of work filled people with social anxieties about exclusion or oppression, the new one appears to evoke existential anxieties about futility and finality as well (Anicich, forthcoming; Petriglieri et al., 2019). It might

be these anxieties that drive totalitarian states of mind and totalitarian groups (Tillich, 2000). These states and groups provide illusory respite from isolation, but only through hatred and persecution of an ‘other’. They are, in short, social defenses. Classic in that they mobilize social structure to soothe anxiety, but novel in the form they take and anxieties they defend against.

We have argued before that if the major concern for early systems psychodynamic scholars was fostering autonomy in structures rendered too tight by social defenses, the major concern for contemporary ones has become fostering meaning in structure that are too loose and move people to find social defenses elsewhere (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020). Social defenses, for example, might more easily be found in discourses and movements across organizations (Bain, 1998; Khaleelee and Miller, 1985), which do not require one to give them up should their organization drop them, or disappear. Examples are the pursuit of ‘global leadership’, or conversely, the support of nationalist movements. If the former affords the illusion that one’s autonomy requires no roots, the latter affords the illusion that one’s stuckness is a choice. Both are defenses against the fragility of organizations and relationships. If autonomy and meaning, however, are not to be illusory, they must be rooted in human relations rather than in idealized and dehumanized connections. The former make space for integration—of conflicting emotions, opposing views, and diverging intents. The latter are based on projective identification, in which groups use each other, often incited by leaders, to displace unwanted aspects of their selves (Petriglieri and Stein, 2012).

Undoubtedly, there remain overbounded enclaves in the ‘new’ world of work as there were underbounded ones in the traditional organizations of the ‘old’ one. A fruitful concern for systems psychodynamic scholars, therefore, might be one of its most traditional. That is, investigating the populations that occupy each space and their division of emotional labor. Who gets to thrive and who feels oppressed, in the tighter and looser territories of the contemporary workplace? Is the ‘new’ world of work just a split world, with haves and have-nots locked in places, in need of subversion and support to repair human relations? If there was ever a moment for a scholarly and political project devoted to explaining, defying, and containing to foster pluralism without polarization, we believe, that moment is now. Just as it once helped people to stand out despite the rigidity of organizations, it must now help them to reach out and hold on to each other despite the fluidity of organizations. We see three areas in which systems psychodynamic can help most, perhaps in collaborations with adjacent perspectives rather than in opposition to their views. Areas for which it can make space in theory and practice, on the way to build more capacious selves and institutions.

Pluralism of intentions

While ambivalence has long been considered aversive, and unitary selves aspirational, there has been growing recognition that being able ‘to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function’ is not just the mark of an intelligent mind, as Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1936) had it. It is the mark of a mature self, and a requirement for managers and workers constantly exposed to conflicting information and a rapid pace of change. Being able to change one’s mind, and being of two minds, is an antidote to prejudice and the only way not to be captive to the tyranny of a

single point of view. These views of ambivalence as functional align with the psychodynamic assumption that mixed feelings are a marker of integration (Kahn, 1992). A generative ambivalence, however, is only possible when people feel contained. When they have space to work through the difficulty of holding two conflicting poles, and when others around them share the same capacity. It has long been the goal of systems psychodynamic work to help managers and workers shift from responding to anxiety by projecting it into others, to working through anxiety, and sometimes even approaching anxiety-provoking situations to learn from them (Hackman and Wageman, 2007). Examining containment for the anxieties of the world of work, where and how such ground for a spacious self might be found and sustained, remains a valuable focus of future scholarship. This focus might also help systems psychodynamic work forge closer ties with research on sensemaking. Scholars have begun to incorporate emotions in their analysis of how people make sense of themselves and their circumstances (Maitlis et al., 2013). Less work, however, has built upon the suggestion that sensemaking might be driven or diverted by unconscious motives such as that to defend against anxiety provoked by the nature of one's occupation (Stein, 2004) or by threats to one's identity (Mikkelsen et al., 2020).

Pluralism of identities

There is growing interest in understanding multiplicity of identities in individuals and societies (Ramarajan, 2014; Ramarajan and Reid, 2020). The friction and coexistence of different selves within and around people has long been a central concern for systems psychodynamic work, which assumes that the most dangerous divisions are the ones we are not aware of, or that we take for granted. In a world in which diversity is an ideal and differences often a challenge, a systems psychodynamic approach is helpful to understand how individuals and organizations can hold and respect differences while sustaining a strong culture. That is, how organizations can host pluralists and hold pluralism. Developing pluralists in management positions is especially critical because 'the nature of their personal identity combined with their managerial authority enables them to not only accept an organization's divergent values but also to foster such acceptance among others' (Besharov, 2014: 1503). The work is also well placed to delve beneath surface level differences, categories, and stances, and reveal what drives people and groups at certain points of time to polarize around points of difference and at others to embrace pluralism. This focus might also help systems psychodynamic scholarship better bridge with adjacent approaches such as critical ones in general, and those of feminist scholars in particular, which combine psychoanalytic and deconstructionist lenses to examine stereotypes and inequalities in the workplace (Fotaki, 2013; Fotaki and Harding, 2013; Kenny and Fotaki, 2015).

Pluralism of ideologies

Scholarship on hybrid organizations is on the rise, as more organizations claim to focus on both financial and social goals (Battilana and Dorado, 2010), and scholars acknowledge that 'organizations are often messy things, with mixed agendas and bruising politics' (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014: 475; Besharov and Smith, 2014).

Systems psychodynamic work has long suggested that every organization is a hybrid, whether its leaders acknowledge it or not. As they make products or offer services, organizations are always shaping people in them and the world around them. We have described the tension between these two functions as involving humanistic and instrumental ideologies, which are constitutive of organizing (Petriglieri et al., 2018) and formative for leaders' identities (Petriglieri and Peshkam, forthcoming). Scholarship on such tensions and paradoxes is booming. They lie at the heart of hybrid organizations and 'defy rational, linear logic, and in so doing create uncertainty and ambiguity that are both emotionally and cognitively threatening' (Smith, 2014: 1594). A systems psychodynamic approach is well suited to contribute to scholarship in this area. In particular, it can help scholars to develop 'a greater sensitivity to people's lived experiences of institutions and institutional contradictions, and tracking in situ their responses to institutional contradictions' (Voronov and Yorks, 2015: 578). Systems psychodynamic work is, after all, about making spaces for paradoxes within selves, identities and institutions, and undoing the ways they have been lodged into relationships.

The work to help people tolerate ambivalence, narrate multiplicity, and manage dualities requires a closer integration of defiance and containment, combativeness and care, in relation to individuals, relations, institutions and the theories and stories that define them. Open minds, multifaceted selves, and democratic institutions require less of a focus on visionary leaders and more of a focus on caring management who keep organizations hospitable. They also require systemic efforts to make such management more widespread, rather than efforts to breed a more enlightened and benevolent elite of future leaders. The liberation project of systems psychodynamic work is far from over. The tightening if more diffuse grip of technologies and ideologies keep its combativeness as useful as ever. But the complementary project of care is needed ever more, to process anxiety and sustain relating. The work reminds us that there can be no freedom without care, and only a capacious care can make space for freedom. We must keep making space for both freedom and care, by holding fast to the intent of integrating research and practice and weaving different strands of social sciences in a fabric that might reveal and protect human relations. That is the work for the next quarter of a century, if the work is to remain alive. Honoring the spirit of combative care, while continuing to grow so the two are more closely integrated. Acknowledging the limits of our insights and the power of a view from the margins. Arguing less about what others have not managed to do and more about what we can offer. Putting research to work and bringing values to life, to keep our selves together and each other close.


Acknowledgements

Both authors contributed equally and are listed alphabetically. We are grateful to *Human Relations* Editor Mark Learmonth for the invitation to write this piece, and to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions. We are also grateful to the members of the Systems Psychodynamic Gathering and the INSEAD Leadership Consultants Group without whom the work would be a lot less alive, and so would we. To be continued.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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