



PSDP - Resources for Managers of Practice Supervisors: Understanding the impact of social systems as defences in your organisation

Introduction

All too often as individuals in groups within organisations, we can find ourselves behaving in ways that are either inefficient when it comes to completing tasks, or are unhelpful when attempting to relate to other people. Nonetheless we continue to behave in these disrespectful, ineffective, and often rather, unsettling and / or dissatisfying ways. How might we understand this common social phenomenon and why does it matter that we do?

This briefing explains the dynamics underpinning common organisational behaviours that inhibit the capacity of individuals to effectively achieve what is referred to as the organisation's 'primary task', ie the reason it exists (Zagier Roberts, 1994). So, in the case of child care social work, it is about understanding what impedes our ability to fulfil as effectively as possible the primary task of child care social work organisations, namely the protection and promotion of the wellbeing of children and their families.

To address this concern, this briefing, written specifically with middle leaders who have the capacity to influence behaviours within organisations in mind, will:

- > profile examples of everyday obstructive organisational behaviours that impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of practice
- > introduce a theoretical framework that helps to explain this phenomenon
- > outline actions that leaders and managers can take to overcome these obstacles.

Having read and digested this briefing you will have the knowledge and skills to both identify and respond to social systems that exist as defences against anxiety. Read on to find out what this all means.

Everyday behaviours in child care social work management and practice

Illustration one

As part of her research into child protection social work, a colleague described how, while observing the everyday activity of a social work team located in an open plan office, she watched the team manager make her way to the toilet. At every turn a worker would jump up and ask her what appeared to be an urgent question. The researcher noted it took the team manager almost an hour to reach the toilet.



Illustration two

While running a workshop on supervision with team managers, one participant described how, when she attended her supervision sessions with her own manager, the manager sat with a clipboard in front of her and began the session by simply saying, 'Wellbeing?'. The workshop participant therefore felt that the expected answer to that one-word question could only be a simple 'yes' or 'no'. The supervisor's behaviour did not appear to show any genuine interest in her supervisee's wellbeing or a wish for any more information, other than an answer that would allow a tick to be put on the supervision checklist that she had attached to her clipboard.



Illustration three

In the context of imminent major organisational restructuring in a social work department, a considerable amount of time is spent in the early part of a weekly team meeting discussing tea and coffee monies and whether the system in place is operating fairly for everyone. The team manager became aware that time was running out to adequately discuss the agenda item addressing the implications of the departmental restructuring on the team. Despite the team manager's attempts to draw the tea and coffee discussion to a close, a team member managed to re-ignite it with another comment.



My guess is that while these examples might not be *exactly* what you have experienced in your everyday work they are likely to resonate with you as you've no doubt had similar experiences.

Reflective questions

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">> What examples do you have of collective behaviours making it difficult for you and your team to 'get the job done'? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">> Can you think of an example when something similar took over your team meeting agenda? What was it? What happened? Who did / said what? What did you do? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">> When you encounter such behaviours, what do you notice about how you feel and how you want to respond? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">> As a middle leader, do you ask the practice supervisors you supervise whether they have experiences of organisational life, like the examples above, which frustrate them or get in the way of working effectively? |

So, what is going on?

In the first illustration, the manager's freedom of movement is constantly impacted on by team members wanting *immediate* attention. The apparent inability of the workers to hold on to whatever is causing them anxiety suggests an absence of a sufficiently 'containing' (see below) team context, one which gives the workers the confidence to hold on to whatever might be concerning them until a more appropriate time (eg when the manager has been to the toilet or perhaps until their regular supervision session). Inevitably there can be urgent matters that require discussion, but when *everything* feels urgent for workers, as appears to be the case in this scenario, something is going wrong.

The second illustration shows how systems can be introduced into organisations with good intentions but can then be distorted by the context in which they are located. In this case, the introduction of a supervision checklist which asks about worker wellbeing is a positive indication of the organisation's commitment to the wellbeing of its workers. Less positive, though, is how it's been implemented. When done properly, a question about wellbeing provides a space for meaningful and supportive conversation. Conversely, presented as a checklist question with a one-word answer to what appears to be a questionnaire on a clipboard, the query undermines any sense of the manager having a genuine interest in the worker's wellbeing.

The third illustration is perhaps the one that will resonate with you most. How often do your team meetings get hijacked by seemingly incidental matters when everyone knows there are much bigger issues that need to be discussed? In this case, the team's behaviour serves to avoid team members having to think about the uncertainty and anxiety generated by the organisational changes taking place.

How, then, can we understand these three examples and what do they all have in common? In each instance the behaviours of the group / individual act as a means of defence against the anxiety associated with an aspect of the work that is too difficult to think about. Such behaviours are known as 'social systems as defences against anxiety'.

Understanding social systems as defences against anxiety

In the 1950s, the psychoanalyst, Isabel Menzies-Lyth (1988), was asked to consult with a large London hospital experiencing difficulties with retaining its nursing staff. Following her observation of the hospital's everyday working practice, Menzies-Lyth developed what has now become a classic theoretical framework for understanding organisations: social systems as defences against anxiety.

In summary, Menzies-Lyth recognised how, in the face of anxiety-provoking situations (in her case caring for sick people and the concerns about life and death associated with their conditions), defensive professional practices develop at the collective level, which serve to prevent individual professionals from experiencing the unavoidable anxiety generated by the circumstances in which they work. Table 1 (below) illustrates the types of collective behaviours witnessed by Menzies-Lyth that acted as defences against anxiety, alongside some contemporary equivalents that are visible in child care social work contexts.

Menzies-Lyth's nursing examples	Contemporary child care social work examples
<p>Depersonalisation of the patient: ‘The liver in Bed 9.’</p>	<p>Depersonalisation of the child or family: ‘The problem family at no. 46...’</p>
<p>Fragmentation of the nurse-patient relationship: Different nurses with different tasks / responsibilities; no one person knows the ‘whole’ patient.</p>	<p>Lack of social worker-service user relational continuity Organisational systems involve children and families moving between teams, eg duty short-term team; longer term team.</p>
<p>Routinised working practices Ritualised counting of the laundry in the linen cupboard.</p>	<p>Dominance of audit and IT requirements Repetitive requests for completion of practice audits and the measurement of outcomes against key performance indicators.</p>
<p>Inappropriate allocation of responsibility Nurses are given too much or too little autonomy around patient care and decision-making.</p>	<p>Distorted decision-making Social workers are required to seek senior management authorisation for very small financial transactions.</p>

Table 1: Social systems as defences against anxiety

The shortcoming of social systems as defences against anxiety, however, is their inability to directly address the sources of anxiety. Consequently, they stop individuals from developing mature and effective ways to cope with the anxiety they experience and tend to generate even more (anxieties viewed through this framework are often avoided and then escalate and manifest themselves in problematic ways, like persistent workforce problems or poor staff morale and retention).



Charles M. Schulz date unknown.

As we become more familiar with the way social systems as defences against anxiety operate, we can spot them more readily in everyday interactions. We can also see parallels between individual and collective (social systems) defences (see table 2).

Understanding defensive behaviours (Foster, 2013)		
	Defensive responses	Integrated responses
Individual dynamics	Paranoid / schizoid position It must be your fault? What are you going to do about it?	Depressive position Am I to blame? What can I do to improve the situation?
Group dynamics	Anti-task defence The problem is 'out there' and we will find ways to protect ourselves from it.	On task behaviour How can I / we help the group to address the task, face internal difficulties and work more effectively?

Table 2: Understanding individual and collective defences

In essence, an individual or collective defensive response (the left hand column) places blame outside of the individual or group. For example, at the individual level we often resort to making someone else responsible for a shortcoming ('If the health visitor had told me sooner this wouldn't have happened') without considering what our own contribution to the situation might have been. A familiar version of this blaming behaviour at the collective level can be witnessed in organisational settings by comments made, for example, in team meetings about the lack of understanding shown by senior management ('It's all management's fault - they don't understand what we do'). While senior managers must undoubtedly take some responsibility for the actions taken, a more mature and integrated collective response must equally acknowledge the team's contribution to the situation and ask 'what can I / we do to make things better?'

Reflective questions

> Do these examples of social systems as defences against anxiety resonate with your own experiences?

> How do you respond to defensive reactions from individuals and how might this inform your responses to collective defensive behaviours?

> Can you identify additional social systems as defences against anxiety in your own organisation?

How can social systems as defences against anxiety be averted?

Offering containment and remaining on task

Closely connected to Menzies-Lyth's social systems as defences against anxiety theoretical framework are ideas associated with other key figures who developed their thinking from the work of the psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein. Drawing on his experiences of working with groups, Wilfred Bion (1961), also a psychoanalyst, developed the idea of containment, whereby an individual's challenging emotional experiences are made tolerable by having someone listen to them and then re-present those same experiences back to the individual in a more manageable form. Containing anxiety at the level of the group requires the same capability, to be able to bear what is unbearable and avoided. As already indicated, the uncertainty that accompanies structural reorganisation is a common cause for dysfunctional collective behaviours to emerge. The responsibility of managers, at all levels, is to help those they manage to bear the uncertainty and remain in adult modes of behaviour.

In circumstances where containment is lacking, it is easy for teams to go 'off task' and to resort to dysfunctional behaviours, in-keeping with those associated with social systems as defences against anxiety. Bion referred to 'on task' behaviour as being groups in 'work mentality mode', and 'anti task' behaviour as groups operating in 'basic assumption mode'. Within the basic assumption mode, Bion identified three particularly common sorts of behaviour:

Basic assumption dependency

Teams resort to parent-child dynamics with team members abdicating their adult responsibility and becoming dependent on the team leader to act as a 'rescuing parent' with full responsibility for sorting the difficulty out.

Basic assumption fight and flight

Possibly the most familiar of the three basic assumption responses is the tendency in the face of unsettling circumstances to either place responsibility 'out there' on someone else, become confrontational, blame them and challenge them to sort the problem out, ie fight, or avoid confrontation altogether by running away and hiding from it, ie flight. The verbal accusations discussed earlier, that senior management need to 'sort it out', fit with the notion of fight responses.

Flight responses are, for example, apparent in a whole team's refusal to attend a training course to learn the requirements of a new IT system being introduced across the organisation.

Basic assumption pairing

In this mode team members invest in rather magical thinking and place their hope in others who will introduce new developments to solve the prevailing concern, such as the relocation of the whole service to new premises or, as mentioned above, the introduction of a new IT system.

All three modes of response fail to tackle the anxiety at source and so generate the sorts of behaviours that Menzies-Lyth framed as the social systems that defend against anxiety.

Supervisors who make themselves open to the dynamics of their team and of individuals within it are more likely to offer emotional containment that offsets the need for a group to resort to defensive and dysfunctional behaviours. As a result of a containing experience and work environment, teams are able to stay 'on task', as mentioned earlier. Meeting the demands of the primary task means people feel clear about the purpose of their work and experience professional pride and satisfaction as a consequence of their efforts.

Reflective questions

- > In what ways do you seek to provide reflective and containing supervision for your practice supervisors?
- > How well developed are your containment skills? What would your team say?
- > How might you introduce these ideas to your practice supervisors to help them think about the group dynamics they are encountering and managing?

Developing cultural competence

Cultural competence is integral to the leadership and management skills outlined above. Anxieties surrounding the capacity to effectively handle issues like racism, religion and sexuality can be considerable and have a paralysing impact on team functioning. Unless the source of anxiety is openly acknowledged, there is a serious danger of avoiding conversations intended to promote culturally competent practice, which can lead to the perpetuation of inequality and prejudice.

The social GRRRAACCEEESSS are a model which describe aspects of personal and social identity that include gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality (Burnham, 2013).

Referring to the social GRRRAACCEEESSS can be helpful in opening up such conversations and, if included in discussions between supervisor and supervisee, can be an important way to balance the inequalities of power that are inherent in that dynamic. That said, inequalities are invariably embedded deeply in the cultures and structures of organisations, so such conversations need to be understood as an ongoing process and not a box-ticking exercise.

Noticing what you notice: developing emotionally attuned antennae

The capacity to be able to make unconscious dynamics visible requires leaders with well-tuned, effective listening skills. Being able to 'notice what you notice' is a skill which invites individuals to pay attention to their emotional responses to the prevailing situation, and to use what is noticed to gain insight into what is causing anxiety or being avoided.

Taking the team meeting example above, you might notice how, as the tea / coffee discussion progresses, you become tense and anxious about the time left in the meeting. Noting your tension and being able to acknowledge it with colleagues, perhaps even before knowing what it relates to, begins to tackle the avoidant dynamics that have taken hold.

If you can connect the feeling to the behaviour then the two can be named. For example, 'I'm noticing I'm getting rather tense as I'm aware we're running out time for some important issues for discussion'. Invariably, acknowledging and naming the effect is a relief not only for you but also for others in the group and the meeting stands a better chance of getting back on track.

Adopting a meta position does not come easily and is challenging, especially when you are responsible for both chairing a meeting and for the need to 'go meta'. Asking a colleague in advance to take this meta position on your behalf can be one way of addressing the challenge. Sharing chair responsibilities with a colleague can also be helpful.

Reflective questions

- > What do you need to become more effectively attuned and able to 'go meta' more easily?
- > How could you improve your own and your team's cultural competence?
- > Can you think of occasions when you have felt like a 'rescuing parent' with too much responsibility placed on you? What was it like? How did you address it?
- > How do fight and flight behaviours manifest in your work setting?

Conclusion

In recent years, organisational development literature and research have placed an emphasis on organisations aspiring to be ‘learning organisations’, able to learn from mistakes and to maintain a constant improvement journey. This briefing expands on this admirable aspiration by broadening what we mean by ‘learning’, and by incorporating an awareness of the impact of anxiety and defensiveness at an organisational level. For the full potential of an organisation to be realised and for its primary task to be achieved, it must be emotionally intelligent and reflective. Understanding social systems as defences against anxiety can contribute towards this end.

Key learning points

- > Anxiety is *always* present in child care social work.
- > Organisations have defensive behaviours that exist beyond the level of the individual.
- > Leaders and managers need to be alert to defensive, avoidant behaviours.
- > Leaders and managers must develop their cultural competence in order to reduce the risk of defensive and oppressive practice.
- > Developing your ability to notice emotional dynamics is crucial for minimising the presence and negative impact of social systems as defences against anxiety.
- > Emotionally attuned and attentive leaders and managers make an invaluable contribution to the development of reflective organisations.

Reflective questions

- > How do the social systems as defences against anxiety theoretical framework resonate with your experiences?
- > When you read about Bion's basic assumption modes of behaviour, do you identify any as relevant to how your team functions? Which and why? How can you address them with your team?
- > What do you need from your line manager to support your development as a containing and emotionally intelligent leader and manager?

Further reading

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