

The proposition that members of a group unconsciously displace the shadow of the group onto other groups to reduce feelings of internal conflict and threat within the group is examined. The discussion focuses on describing characteristics of the group shadow, as well as its psychodynamic function within and between groups. Researchable propositions derivable from the dynamics of the group shadow are presented

THE DYNAMICS OF THE GROUP SHADOW IN INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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In some respects Turner's metaphor of complex organizations as savage tribes seems apropos for describing intergroup behavior within organizations (Turner, 1977). Members of organizations often conceptualize their interconnection with other groups both within the organization and externally in terms of "friends" and "enemies." Interdepartmental warfare is commonplace although the telltale signs of its existence may suggest a subtly covert battle rather than a blatant, open one. The dysfunctional consequences of such warfare are exacerbated by the experienced helplessness and inability to effectively manage the "warring" dynamics or constructively learn from them.

The intent here is to present a psychodynamic explanation of the persistence of unresolved tensions that occur at the boundary between groups. Viewed from this perspective, tensions at the boundary are hypothesized to arise from unconscious behavior within and between the groups that blocks the development of the awareness and insight necessary to both learn from and effectively manage the boundary tension. Stated somewhat differently, the experienced feelings of frustration, inertia, and stagnation stemming from an inability to manage the tension between group boundaries indicate that unconscious factors are clouding the picture. This article attempts to identify significant unconscious factors as well as to explore issues pertaining to group interventions focused on amplifying awareness and insight into these factors.

It has been a common observation that groups often develop their identity through comparing and differentiating themselves from other groups. A group, for example, may consciously or unconsciously create or focus on an enemy group to avoid openly confronting internal tensions and problems. In such instances, although on the surface the group unifies against a common enemy and differentiates itself from the other group, this is accomplished by glossing over internal conflicts. From a psychodynamic perspective, the group unconsciously splits certain patterns of feelings and impulses into "bad" objects such as the enemy group and "good" objects such as themselves or friendly groups (Jaques, 1955). The enemy group functions as a scapegoat for what are experienced as unacceptable negative qualities, impulses, feelings, and thoughts within the group. For example, the enemy group may be described as cold, calculating, and aggressive, as if it were the sole possessor of such attributes. The externalization of such attributes onto another group through denial, splitting, and projection allows group members to distance themselves from taking personal responsibility for openly dealing with these threatening thoughts and feelings within the group. The content of this process of denying, splitting, and projecting onto an enemy group is here identified as *the group shadow*.

The concept of the group shadow is in part an extrapolation at the group level of the concept of the shadow personality articulated by Jung (1970). The shadow personality consists of unintegrated personal attributes that seem alien, negative, and threatening to an individual. The group shadow, on the other hand, is composed of the emotional negativity occurring within and between members of a group in the process of working together that remains unexpressed. The group shadow is constituted by the attributes that members of a group find most difficult to accept in themselves and in their relationships with one another. In some respects, the shadow is the evil that lurks in the heart of man. The group shadow operates primarily in the preconscious domain, where immediate awareness of it is repressed. However, being lodged in the preconscious, it tends to be more readily accessible for movement into the realm of conscious awareness.

The negativity cast into the shadow is a shifting, murky ground that can take many forms: feelings of competitiveness, envy, anger, hostility, boredom, despair, helplessness, confusion, and ineffectiveness. From a Gestalt perspective, the group is a never-ending sequence of polarities. Whenever a group recognizes one attribute of itself, the presence of its antithesis or polar quality is implicit. The group shadow functions as a repository for polarities that are unacceptable to group members. For example, a group may be conscious of its supportiveness but unaware of its polar opposite, hostility. Members of the group prefer to see themselves as supportive only rather than also acknowledging their hostility, which remains submerged, an aspect of group shadow. The more aware a group becomes of polarities hidden in its shadow, the less likely is it that the group will act out these polarities against another group (Polster and Polster, 1973).

A group tends to act in a way, largely unconscious, that avoids contact with its shadow. Much like animism that resulted in populating the external world with evil spirits and demons that were simply manifestations of one's inner life, a group strives to rid itself of its shadow through externalization (Freud, 1950). The boundaries between a group and other groups represents a fertile void for the displacement of the shadow onto another group. With displacement, the group looks for everything dark, inferior, and culpable in other groups. The result is that the shadow is experienced and perceived as an independent enemy, existing outside the group rather than being experienced and perceived as the group's own inner problems. The less the opportunity for direct contact between the groups and the greater the perceived competitiveness, the greater the potential screen for projecting the shadow of the group. Paradoxically, as the content of the shadow accumulates, hostility toward the other group increases, accompanied by less open and less direct contact between the groups. That is, when a group mistrusts another group, credibility becomes low. When this occurs group members feel that it is unnecessary and unwise to communicate with the "enemy" because the latter will only try to trick or manipulate them. Thus, it becomes easier for each group to maintain a negative stereotype of the other while simultaneously making it more difficult to correct perceptual distortions.

The boundary between groups is a highly emotionally charged area in which members of a group frequently experience feelings of confusion, chaos, disintegration, and impending disaster. Indeed, A. K. Rice (1969) speculated that the critical factors determining the effectiveness of interdependent groups in achieving a common expressed purpose would largely be determined by the extent that the groups involved felt that they had to defend their respective boundaries. Paradoxically, the greater the felt need to defend boundaries, the less direct contact

occurs across group boundaries. I believe that part of the reason for groups strongly defending their boundaries and being reluctant to cross boundaries, can be found in the dynamics of the shadow. The groups unconsciously collude to keep the boundaries unclear and confused to avoid contacting whatever shadow parts of the one group are being mirrored in the other group. Groups remain literally out of touch with each other, as well as themselves, in terms of the threatening shadowy parts being displaced. With awareness of shadow dynamics, a group becomes more capable of defining boundaries between what is inside the group and what is outside the group.

Although the displacement of the shadow may serve an important cathartic function by providing an outward target for hostile and aggressive impulses, it also results in unconscious learning blocks that tend to sustain the adversarial dynamics. The major learning block is constituted by the externalization of the shadow that makes it impossible for members of the group to learn and develop constructive ways of internally dealing with issues embedded in its shadow. For example, a group that perceives another group as mistrusting, ruthless, and reactive while denying that these attributes exist in their own group will dissipate energy into maintaining a false image of itself. Moreover, self-sealing learning operating through a self-fulfilling prophecy is likely to occur, as members are likely to act in ways that confirm their perception of the “shadowed” or enemy group. A negative perceptual set is formed around the group targeted with the shadow so that mistrust and suspiciousness are evoked. The group acts on the basis of this perception, thereby leading the other group to become more guarded and mistrusting toward them. As Zand (1972) has demonstrated, when a mistrust perceptual set is evoked there is less openness, fewer attempts to clarify problems, and less readiness to respond positively to influence attempts by others.

All groups have shadows, although the content and the way they are manifested vary. One common manifestation that I have found in working with various groups is what I call *the harmony illusion*. It is a direct derivative of the group shadow in that it represents group idealization. When the illusion is operative, members deny and avoid discussing emotional negativity and cognitive differences that occur between them as they work together. What is denied and avoided goes into the shadow and is displaced into another group. The illusion itself represents a public myth that members of the group are a harmonious family with no real intellectual differences, emotional negativity, or conflicts. Group members tend to describe themselves in “glowing” terms stressing only positive attributes—real, imagined, and those they wish were present— while simultaneously disclaiming the existence of any tensions or negativity.

The shadow forces behind the harmony illusion exercise a powerful grip over a group. It is here that the idea of organizations as composed of savage tribes is most illuminating. The group sees itself as a tribal entity but projects away its own savageness. The tribal identity is based on the idealization present in the harmony illusion. Blake and Mouton (1961), in their early work on intergroup relations, referred to what they called a natural “superiority complex” of the group. By this they were referring to the tendency of groups to perceive themselves as above average with the positive rating tending to increase over time. When competition was introduced, the group rating of itself became even higher. The “my group is better than your group” dynamic was also manifested by groups in competition evaluating their own solution as best while downgrading or rejecting the solution of other groups. That is, the group saw only positives in their own solution and only negatives in the solutions of competing groups. Not surprisingly, a group tended to know more about its own solution than about the solution of other

groups, in spite of systematic efforts that were made to ensure complete understanding through questions, comparison, and representative negotiation. Paradoxically, under conditions of competition, members of one group perceive that they understand the other group's solution when in fact they do not. Thus, the tribal bonding used as a protection from its shadow results in an inability to accurately perceive reality.

In summary, under competition a group distorts perceptions, tending to perceive only the best parts of itself, denying its weaknesses, and tends to perceive only the worst parts of the other group, denying its strengths. One psychological explanation for these findings is that competition tends to formalize or legitimate the "we/they" division, providing a readily available identifiable enemy on which to cast the group shadow.

The work of Janis (1972) on "groupthink" appears pertinent to the harmony illusion. He uses this term to refer to the tendency of a group to act in a way that creates a pseudo-concurrence as to an action plan for coping with the other group. Social pressure exists inside the group, resulting in the suppression of critical thinking and expression of differences that produces an unrealistic assessment of alternative courses of action. The greater the surface friendliness among members of an in-group, the greater is the possibility that critical thinking will be suppressed or repressed, which is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions against perceived out-groups.

There are certain symptoms of groupthink that have a direct bearing on the harmony illusion, beyond the obvious one of a "pseudo-esprit de corps" serving as decoy to blunt the experiencing of the group shadow. First of all, groups caught up in groupthink share an illusion of unanimity in judgment. It is inaccurately assumed that members who remain silent during the discussion are necessarily in accord with the viewpoints being expressed. Group members themselves reinforce this assumption by keeping silent about their misgivings, minimizing to themselves the importance of their doubts. Members with different opinions mistakenly tend to assume that since they (think) that they are alone in their reservations or disagreements, the majority must be more accurate in its judgment. Additionally, the uncertainty and anxiety aroused by discordance result in members unconsciously colluding to block latent disagreement from surfacing when they are about to initiate a risky course of action. The members support one another by emphasizing areas of convergence in their thinking, at the expense of fully exploring divergences that might reveal unsettled issues and unsettling emotions.

The theoretical explanation that Janis provides for the occurrence of groupthink is that it constitutes a mutual effort among the members of a group to maintain self-esteem and emotional stability by providing social support to one another, especially at a time when they share responsibility for making vital decisions. While this tribal ceremony of a harmony illusion may take place, I would conjecture that a reasonable psychodynamic explanation is that the group's pseudo-unification is a way of avoiding contact with the shadow that is displaced on the enemy. The greater the experienced crisis with the enemy, the greater is the likelihood of the repressed shadow being evoked and the greater the need to displace it. Thus, the greater members' fear of being harmed or harming one another through criticism or ridicule, the more likely they are to focus the criticism and ridicule on the "enemy" group.

In practice, a group that is caught in its "shadow" is not too difficult to identify. There are a number of manifestations. First, as previously mentioned, group members tend to describe

themselves as a group in an exaggerated positive way: the harmony illusion. For example, a group of branch managers in a large bank, when asked to describe themselves as a group, indicated that they worked well together as a team, were open and friendly in their communication, were interested in one another, and had a good sense of humor. They perceived no negativism within their group.

The second manifestation is that members of the group imagined that the “enemy,” or other group, will perceive them in predominantly negative terms. For example, the branch managers of the bank tended to see the support staff as an enemy. When asked to describe how they imagined the staff support group would perceive them, they replied with the following descriptions: resistant to change, mistrustful, hostile, defensive, fearful of taking risks. They quickly denied that this imagined negative image might also be an accurate description of them.

That the imagined image was a shadow issue among the branch managers themselves became clearer with the passage of time. The branch managers were able to see how they were mistrustful, hostile, defensive, and fearful of taking risks with one another as well as with support staff.

The third manifestation is that members of the group, when asked to describe the enemy group, can provide only negative attributes—clearly an aspect of their displaced shadow. One way the branch managers described the support staff was as destructively competitive. This not only represented a displacement of the group shadow but also served the function of justifying the rejection and sabotage of proposals initiated by the staff support group.

The attempt of a group to rid itself of its shadow through displacement is like a dog chasing its tail. The war to end all wars never works because, although a group might annihilate its enemy, it cannot annihilate its shadow. A new enemy will be invented unless the members of the group learn how to deal more directly with the shadow. Until a group can own its shadow and internally begin to work on it, it will be haunted by it, finding it everywhere. Without awareness, a group finds its shadow mirrored in other groups. For example, a group that is threatened by internal competition constantly focuses on issues of internal competition in other groups while denying it within itself.

The group shadow tends not to be projected on a blank screen or focused randomly on objects in the environment. What terms or symbols a group uses to describe the other group are important clues to the most figural aspects of the members’ own underlying needs and fears. For example, a group within an organization that views another group as destructively competitive is signaling the internal fears of the member toward the destructive competition within the group itself.

In dealing with the shadow, it is important to separate two elements in the projection process: accuracy and “ownership.” The projection of the shadow is accurate when the target group actually possesses the attributed characteristic. “Ownership,” on the other hand, refers to the extent that the attribution can be brought into awareness and consciously acknowledged by members as belonging to their group even though it is accurate about the target group. Awareness in a group is a crucial factor, as without it choice is not possible. A group cannot be responsible for what it is unaware of in its behavior. What a group is unaware of in its behavior is unmanageable. Accuracy and ownership are closely intertwined, as the target group chosen for displacement of the shadow usually offers some basis in reality for the attributions (Polster and Polster, 1973). For example, a group that is fearful of the aggressive feelings among its members

will displace these feelings onto a group in which the manifestation of aggressive feelings clearly is in the open. Group members breathe a sigh of relief stating, “We sure are glad we are not like that awful group.” However, in a sense the old adage applies: It takes one to know one.

Most organizational approaches to conflict management among groups are cognitively biased in the sense that they assume that groups are consciously aware of all the factors creating and sustaining conflict (Burke, 1975). The study of *unconscious* factors in conflict between groups has largely been neglected. It is my contention that the shadow-driven aspects of conflict between any two groups is unconscious and that until it is brought into awareness, substantive issues cannot be constructively worked through by these two groups.

A detailed consideration of specific intervention processes for enabling groups to become both more aware and more adroit in managing their shadow is beyond the scope of this article. In general, however, it entails amplifying awareness of the shadowing process between groups; identifying the underlying emotional conflicts and needs within the group that stand in the way of dealing with the issues internally; and, finally, learning the skills to constructively deal with the shadow issues inside the group. There are a variety of forms such interventions can take: an organizational development mirror, roleplaying with alter egos, and free association. Although problematic, for maximal effectiveness I suspect that, at this stage of development, intervening and working with the shadow in a group requires an applied behavioral scientist who is highly skilled in group process, interpersonal behavior, and personal growth.

Systematic research is needed to provide information on effective ways of intervening to enable a group to grapple more effectively with its shadow.

In the interest of furthering such research, I offer the following propositions that can be converted into researchable hypotheses:

Proposition 1: When two or more interdependent groups are experiencing conflict and they are unable to openly discuss it, the conflict remains unresolved because each group lacks awareness of its shadow. Groups that tend to remain fixated in conflict with one another are caught in their respective mutual shadows.

Proposition 2: To the extent that a group becomes aware of, accepts, and integrates its shadow, it will perceive other groups more accurately, be less defensive toward feedback from the other group, be more cooperative, and develop more permeable tribal boundaries. The greater the extent that members can “own” the shadow of being displaced, the greater is the likelihood that they will be open to crossing group boundaries to either creatively resolve or acknowledge differences between the groups.

The time appears ripe for systematic theorizing and research on psychodynamic explanations of organizational phenomena. Shevrin and Dickman (1980) demonstrate that systematic empirical research on unconscious psychological processes is feasible. They argue that no theory that attempts to explain how humans behave can ignore the concept of unconscious psychological processes. Similarly, Cooper and Gustafson (1979) have used qualitative data to demonstrate the impact of the unconscious psychological process on the development of groups by identifying how group members unconsciously plan and decide what

to do to further their development. I hope that the propositions presented here will encourage further investigations, resulting in a clearer understanding of the unconscious psychodynamics, including the group shadow, as these affect the group internally as well as its relationship to other groups and to broader environments.

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