Oedipal and Sibling Dynamics in Organizations

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In a context of rapid change, outbreaks of sibling rivalry in organizations act as a defence against the inability to mourn and feel remorse. When changes are imposed on work-teams, sibling preoccupations surface to prevent the working through of the breakdown of relations between the institutional parents and their dependants. Siblings also adopt envy-preventing strategies, engaging in collective self-idealization by forming sisterhoods or brotherhoods to protect themselves from disillusionment and individuation. Each succeeding generation has to face the fact that a primus inter pares *will have to be chosen to inherit the mantle of power from the parental generation and restore the world to its 'normal' state of inequality. In the context of recent structural changes in organizations the new managers have acted like borderline parents and fostered sibling rivalry. This dynamic has functioned to deny the guilt and the fear of retaliation associated with fratricide and matricide committed during the 're-engineering' process, when the youngsters sent their parents into early retirement. I want to explore the central importance of authority, disillusionment and mourning and show that the outbreak and suppression of sibling rivalry is connected with the problem of transition and succession in organizations.*

Key words: change, disillusionment, mourning, oedipal conflict, siblings

Sibling rivalry is part of the figure–ground dynamic in all work-teams and between different subgroups of an organization. Our propensity to cling to an internalized bad sibling object and its remembered resentment begins to shape reactions when the boss has been lost or a new departmental structure has been imposed. During such transitions, teams and organizations lose touch with the depressive position and regress into the primitive world of part-object relations. Professionals in work-groups are outraged at the injustice of the imposed change, resort to blame and begin to communicate with the help of projection, splitting and acting out. The misunderstood and rejected child inside, awakened by organizational change, can only hang on to the inner hurt inflicted by the internalized parents and siblings, losing touch with the capacity of the external parents and siblings in the here-and-now to show concern. The narcissistic injury of losing the 'fathering' team leader or the 'mothering' organizational culture is projected outwards, the basic assumption group takes over and defensive manoeuvres affect task performance.

In this regressed position a 'malignant' work-group of apparently innocent victims emerges and becomes the 'only acceptable world' in the mind of each team member. Colleagues and potential allies are set up to disappoint by being compared to an idealized and lost team and end up confirming the fact that the victim of change can do nothing. Team leaders and the group begin to pick on the rotten apple within, the selfish careerist and opportunist without, or, worse still, the grown-up adult who tries to work with the opportunity for development contained in change. These scapegoats are cathected with unwanted feelings towards the bad sibling within an otherwise good family and serve as a location point in the group matrix for a sense of dissociation within the self, the other and the world.

A transpersonal network of 'false' selves comes to dominate the team — each member begins to focus on relating only to the denigrated self within, or persecutory stranger without. The desired good sibling, who could provide holding and safety and with whom one could share and play in the face of change, gets excluded from the currently 'known world'. Team members, who have been infantilized by the imposed change or the loss of the leader, regress into a dyadic fusion in which the boundary between inside and outside gets blurred and the oedipal conflict is leapfrogged with the

help of perverted forms of communication within an idealized group (mother) and in relation to a denigrated external world (father).

Only if a good enough parent-figure intervenes and moves the team on by reconnecting it to a world of work which is demanding and nurturing can the task performers within the team confront the labour pains associated with imposed change. If the team is allowed to stay in the regressed dyadic position, team members will get trapped in a dynamic typical of an overdemanding mother who asks the baby to forgo its own needs and develop a false self to assuage the anxiety associated with being a caring mother. Team leaders and members unconsciously begin, in their state of dissociation, to believe their helpless view and start to experience the work-group as a failing mother who has turned from *being* attuned to *doing* cannibalistic things. The world of work takes on the shape of 'hell on earth' and authoritarian and magical solutions are sought in defence against the 'unbearableness' of being.

Recent restructuring exercises in organizations have produced a supposed self-ideal for each employee as autonomous, responsible and accountable. Larry Hirschhorn (1993) has pointed out that the way in which these demands for an enforced growing-up have been made resulted in a new type of dependency on the changing organization. Work-teams which used to keep basic assumption positions at bay through competent task performance have now settled for pairing and dependency as a way of life. Consequently, relationships within the re-engineered team are characterized by the politics of resentment, thinking and linking is attacked, and mental energy is needed to fend off what Earl Hopper (1997) has called the fourth basic assumption of incohesion/massification.

Imposed organizational change reproduces the anxiety-ridden mental state of a baby when it faces the separation of me and not-me and needs to move into the early phase of the oedipal conflict. An organization of this type is characterized by high levels of anxiety about boundary issues, role strain and normative expectations. The boundary confusion resulting from a transition from an old to a new way of working has to be worked through. When this is not done, each team will get stuck in oral and anal dynamics and express needs and aggressive feelings through phrases like 'it isn't fair' and 'I am not going to be the Cinderella around here'. The result is that a paranoid-schizoid matrix is woven into the team and its work programme, everyone colludes in dividing the world into

victims and perpetrators, insiders and outsiders, loyalists and traitors.

Personal growth in that context is located beyond the here-and-now and takes on the form of an imagined escape or lotto win. Those who succeed in leaving the organization trigger envy in those left behind and their success reinforces sibling rivalry and feelings of impotence. The process is reflected in the internal world and team members project destructive feelings outwards and cathect a lost golden age with libidinous energy. Real energy for change is withdrawn from the team and work becomes a form of purgatory. As a doctor in a GP group put it: 'If it wasn't for my two sessions at Broadmoor, I would go mad in this surgery.'

Sibling rivalry can also function as a defence against disillusion-ment and the reality of death, misfortune and inequality. The internalized oedipal relationships, which get transferred into the organization, help to retain an inability to mourn and protect the sib group from the loss of a leader and the disintegration of cherished ideals. These transference relationships protect those affected from having to own their collusion in bringing about the undesired change. It is a manic flight from the pain of having lost the attuned parent and an ideal view of how life in institutions should be. In organizations when the leader has 'died' or a lifetime's habit of working is lost the capacity for thinking and real dialogue is also lost, and replaced by rage and collective self-idealizations. The team moves into the position of a group of abandoned children who have to triangulate on their own and face the task of delegating the role of the leader to one brother or sister. Rites of passage such as primogeniture, which kinship systems use to negotiate a transition, are often unavailable to organizations and the absence of such containment sets free powerful feelings of envy and rejection. The resultant anxiety in the organization is defended against by envy-prevention strategies like ever tighter monitoring procedures and the construction of a 'virtual reality world' of policy documents. Siblings, as parents in waiting, give themselves the power of the older parent but they fear being overwhelmed by duty and project the burden of the superego on to an external and idealized paper world. The 'father' in many organizations has truly become a 'paper tiger'. Relationships in the dependent position become increasingly sado-masochistic and those trapped in them use jargon to construct a facade of verbal 'empowerment' and control.

The new generation of bosses inhabits a basic assumption

position of sibling rivalry where the parent is still needed as an object of blame. These immature grown-ups can be found in the public sector and in private companies. The process of replacing the leader in organizations has recently been made more volatile by 'double-bind recruitment policies' through the 'unfair' use of head-hunters and the introduction of 'fair' selection procedures which propose that the world can be made equal by adherence to an imagined correct line. These mixed messages breed a multitude of 'false' selves rooted in the idea of an idealized 'leader' or a perfect sisterhood and brotherhood. These shared self-objects help to deny difference and try to meet the need for group cohesion and ideological hygiene. In a context of insecurity, due to job losses or over-zealous campaigns of political correctness, the most volatile, the most perfect and the most power-hungry — not the most capable and competent siblings — become the new holders of parental power. My own generation is now ruled by 'empowered' siblings who turned into Thatcher's children. Those who are left out of the gains as 'disempowered' cannot square their 'step-sibs' with the inheritance of '68. What we did then to our parents has now been visited upon us.

The Primary Health Care Team

I was asked by a Health Authority to help a Primary Health Care Team (PHCT) come to terms with the recent changes in the NHS. I provided a research-cum-consultancy process which included eight group sessions and a role consultancy (Wilke et al., 1995). When the group work started I found all the symptoms of imposed change. The demand to grow up had produced a dyadic relationship between a helpless child (PHCT) and an ailing environmental mother (NHS). The supposed victims in the team and the reviled perpetrators in the bureaucracy were trapping themselves in a denigratory relationship. The stress levels in the group were high and performance and creativity was low. Beyond the presenting problems I discovered a *sado-masochistic* relationship between the group and its leader. The most senior member of the group was waiting to get out of general practice due to his apparent inability to cope with the introduction of the new GP contract. He uncon-sciously colluded with keeping the ghost of his predecessor alive. This ghost was used by the burnt-out successor, the practice manager and the peer group of the junior partners as a superego

before whose eyes any real pretender to the throne was found wanting.

The group sessions revealed a suffocating culture of politeness in the practice. The tragic comedy of manners between staff and doctors functioned to deny rivalry and envy. By default the parental role in the practice was abdicated to the practice manager — the wicked step-mother — who alternately functioned as a messiah and scapegoat. She symbolized the enchantment of the lost golden age and legitimized her power by pairing with the ghost of the dead father. When her authority was challenged she evoked the idealized pair and denigrated her adopted brood. The split-off good leader was mirrored by the bad and exhausted senior partner in the group. In the 'good old days' he would have taken over and basked in the glory of seniority for a limited number of years before handing over to the next generation. Such ideas are 'old fashioned' now and the senior partner ended up waiting for his retirement in a resigned way whilst watching the potential successors avoid the issues of patricide and disinheritance. Through the group process it was possible to re-integrate this weak father into the practice and triangulation became possible. The wisdom of his experience was used to modify ideas for the modernization of the practice and 'attuned' the pace of change to the human needs of the team.

The second dynamic adopted by the doctors to prevent the outbreak of sibling rivalry was the abdication of judgement and responsibility. Instead of integrating the task and emotional level, team members sought to avoid mistakes and role differentiation by adhering to very strict procedures. It was vital to use the group setting as a container for the integration of the split-off aggressive and rivalrous feelings and help the PHCT face the oedipal conflict which was reawakened by the reforms. Earl Hopper's (1994) contribution to the London Sibling Workshop helped me make sense of the unconscious conflict in the group and explained the secondary gain from not facing issues linked to rivalry, fratricide and matricide. He argued that the arrival of the new group member triggers a frightening victim–perpetrator dynamic and suggested that the new group member is forced into the position of the 'chosen one'. The new object becomes the target of intense envy which mirrors the projective interactions between the anti-Semite and his intended victim. If this is generally true, then the team, which has to accommodate new ideas or a different leader, has an interest in killing off the embodiment of change. If the change agent is

imposed from outside, a culture of policing and punishment is developed by the group. The result is a collusive system of perpetrators, victims and bystanders who trap each other in perverse forms of relationship and communication. The focus of attention shifts from effectiveness to conformity and treachery.

Parking Enforcement

The Thatcher governments introduced reforms to the state sector that were designed to overcome restrictive practices. A system called Compulsory Competitive Tendering was introduced and work-teams were split into purchasers and providers of services. The allocation of work became subject to the market, the purchasers defined and costed the tasks and then advertised a contract for the work. Their ex-colleagues in the provider team had to bid for the tender of their own work against outside companies and were forced to relinquish any restrictive practices in order to win the contract and save their jobs. The provider team was judged on commercial criteria and the group needed to form a trading company in the context of having been disinherited and feeling like unwanted children.

The Parking Enforcement Team I worked with had become subject to this process. The team defended against the threat to its existence by regressing into a pre-verbal relationship with the world. Market forces exposed the way various subgroups within the department had used self-idealization, splitting and denigration to maintain a regime which favoured hard-line union members and disenfranchised those who wanted to manage and modernize the service. CCT mirrored the split and divided the new group into favoured purchasers and rejected providers resulting in a part-object universe in which the provider group became unable to relate to the self, the other and the parental world of the organization in anything other than a paranoid-schizoid way.

I was called in as 'the psychologist' when team members finally gave vent to their frustrations and started to express themselves through panic attacks, aggression towards motorists and a flood of grievances. The organization had labelled the team as incapable of winning the contract, the senior manager wished the group dead and wanted them punished by being sold off. However, the newly elected Labour councillors wanted their in-house workforce to win the contract. I was given carte blanche to help the team achieve this

goal and ended up reconnecting all levels of the organization through my intervention by using the whole range of psychoanalytic methods: small groups, individual role consultancy and large groups. This integrated approach was designed to locate the dis-ease in the system's matrix, reconnect perceived victims and perpetrators in a dialogue and facilitate the building up of sufficient trust to enable key players to re-engage with reality. The project took over a year to complete and in the end the contract was won.

For a long time I was confused by this team as its members persistently attacked any attempt to think and connect. Before I could help the supervisors, in their weekly small group, develop a transpersonal network, and before ego training in action could take place, I too had to survive and be contained and held. What helped me were the metaphors and thoughts of other analysts. Estela Welldon's ideas presented at the London Sibling Workshop (1994) on dead siblings and their effect on primary and secondary groups made me see what lay behind some of the self-destructive behaviour that characterized the interactions between staff and managers. She demonstrated how new children become a palliative for the mother in order to alleviate the pain of having lost a baby. Instead of mourning the loss, the parents try to repair the damage through a 'quick fix pregnancy' with the result that the new child and the mother get locked into a fantasized symbiotic relationship. The mother remains attached to the dead baby and projects its imagined development into the real infant. The baby starts to construct an imaginary fusion with an idealized but unattuned mother. This type of mothering can have devastating results leading to the development of sexualized, enmeshed and unhealthy relationships.

The Parking Enforcement Team showed all the hallmarks of such transferred family dynamics, for they related in a cannibalistic, incestuous and self-destructive way. The senior managers had withdrawn in the face of such an angry bunch of unwanted children. The sib group of supervisors had begun to devour each other by lodging complaints with personnel and demanded committees of inquiry when somebody in the peer group had made the slightest mistake. The system colluded with this pre-verbal culture of outrage by suspending anybody who had been accused without recourse to any arbitration. The team turned into a Greek drama with a chorus of silent bystanders, content to watch the heroes and anti-heroes devour each other. The enactment dramatized everyone's fear of annihilation connected with the competitive tendering process and

in that sense it made sense. The siblings lost through grievances, complaints and restructuring exercises were not mourned but instantly replaced with fresh recruits. The lost ones were envied for 'getting out of hell' and the panicky way these colleagues were replaced set up the next sado-masochistic drama or justified more autistic self-mutilation. There was no space to think in for the team, the abused and abusers repeated the trauma and were lost to the real world.

In this world of beta elements, team members could not consciously face up to the threat of change, they preferred attacking themselves and their helper to being annihilated by others. From this flowed an inability to perform basic tasks and an obsession with the image of their anticipated failure. I accepted the projections and held the group by just being there, without understanding how we could move into a whole-object relations universe. On my search for 'transitional ideas' I read Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel's (1985) work on perversion and creativity. Her metaphors finally enabled me to piece together the fragments of the team's story into a coherent narrative and exchangeable language. She proposes that we all have a perverse core which comes to dominate our personalities in extreme situations. The Parking Enforcement Team tried to deal with the threat of annihilation posed by CCT with the perverse parts of their personalities and wished away all values and order. The perverse defence allowed them to regress to a primal chaos which could serve to re-invent the world in the image of the Marquis de Sade.

People trapped in this position relate to the world and each other within the confines of the anal universe. The Sadean character wants to avoid the pain associated with the oedipal conflict by redefining what is pure as dirty and what is polluted as sacred. I experienced the group for many sessions as a gigantic gut which re-digested all psychic material in such a way that it could be spewed out as faeces. It felt like sitting in a baby peer group which had not yet learned that faeces are socially defined as impure. The group experimented creatively and destructively with 'its own shit' and hoped that all this waste could become a primal soup out of which one could reconstruct the world in a wished-for and anxiety-free way. It seemed that they wanted to alternate between being the innocent victims of an evil conspiracy or acting out as an omnipotent and vengeful Blakean god whose need is to destroy the basic building blocks of social order and psychological integrity.

The categories we use to structure and differentiate the social world such as parents, children, employers and employees were deconstructed and fused. The need to abolish all differences and replace existing hierarchies with an anal universe in which all particles are equal and deserving of redemption amounted to a collective delusion which was designed to get feelings of inadequacy, castration, loss, absence and death under control. The team wished to free itself from the law of the land and the parental world of the organization. The work in the group was that of disillusionment, re-illusionment, holding and containing. Being there, putting the group before the individual in a containing way, is an art lost to the 'modernized' manager.

The Further Education College

The college had to cope with a new system of funding and resource allocation which prevented duplication and exposed splits between senior and middle managers. The new financial arrangements demanded team work and exposed the unconscious method used for maintaining a divide and rule culture. Senior and middle managers were vying with each other to leave territorial defences intact. Team leaders and heirs-in-waiting were locked into a comfortable pairing relationship with their preferred manager and mirrored the dynamics between parents and overprotected children. The special relationship entitled middle managers to an 'unfair' allocation of the resources and burdened them with debts of gratitude. These debts were called in when the senior managers themselves had to deliver on some major new initiative and became subject to close monitoring from the college Principal. The collusive system produced high levels of resentment and paralysed the creativity needed to deal with a changed environment.

Group sessions were set up in order to explore new forms of co-operation. The group process revealed that oedipal and adolescent dynamics deepened by the financial reforms had followed on the heels of a forced institutional merger. The breakdown between two heads of department and their respective junior managers unconsciously kept the split between the old and new institutions alive. The two managers, just like borderline parents, fostered splitting and rivalry among their children in order to avoid having to confront their own losses. The guilt incurred by the parents during the merger of the institutions was so great — due to the large

number of people who were made redundant or retired — that the feelings had to be denied and transferred to the next generation.

The college managers showed symptoms of being traumatized. Those in the parent and sibling roles seemed unable to hold on to any kind of basic trust in the self, the other or the organizational environment. The boundaries between the generations had become blurred by the collective burden of guilt. In a fortnightly group these managers began to reconnect the pieces. However, each time we faced the need to translate an idea into reality, the trauma of being swallowed up through a change in the setting resurfaced. It became clear that the demand for co-operation could only be experienced as a painful reminder of the events leading up to the merger of the institutions and could not be coped with yet in the depressive position.

The group embodied the bereaved siblings who cannot triangulate by themselves, nor could they really absolve their parents from the transferred guilt. Nevertheless, the group showed that these team leaders were busy acting out the lives of their institutional parents rather than their own. They could not mature in time to implement the funding system and I decided to force the issue by reconnecting the transgenerational hierarchy in the organization. The group invited the college Principal and jointly the blockages were located in the shared matrix of their merged institutions and decathected from the faulty characters of the naughty children. The Principal's forthright leadership freed the group from deciding on new line management arrangements, with the result that the two senior managers were divorced and the team leaders empowered to develop their own areas. When the Principal — 'Mam' — adopted the 'father' as a special projects manager and gave 'mother' custody of the children, the siblings, who had inherited the change legacy, related across territories and began to perform tasks jointly. The key to a greater tolerance of reality was the differentiation of the generations and restoration of a stereotypical role set. This 'restoration' allowed the college to meet its financial targets and avoid job losses.

Entering a changed and as yet unknown world entails a re-adjustment of the existing forms of identification with internal working models of parents and siblings. The unconsciously transferred family ways of coping will no longer fit the new social context. Some oedipal and sibling identifications will have to be

buried with each change. Group developments mirror the separa-
tion-individuation process during early infancy. Giving up an
outmoded identification amounts to a sacrifice which engenders
group cohesion and grief. To embrace change, both the group and
the individual within it have to mourn before they can recreate and
adjust their professional sense of I and we. The college managers
could only embrace new funding mechanisms and let go of their
propensity to act out when an unconscious world of idealized and
falsely equal parents, children and siblings was buried. Embracing
the reality of a modern organization implies that one has to come to
terms with primogeniture and accept that not everyone will get an
equal share of the inheritance. The organizational world is and will
remain hierarchical but paradoxically can be run more humanely
when this unpalatable fact is taken in. Only the acceptance of this
de-idealized reality will enable work-groups find a playful and
reparative relationship to change.

Conclusion

Imposed change forces the issue of succession to the surface and
leads to a renewed outbreak of oedipal conflicts and sibling rivalry.
The recent craze for business process re-engineering has speeded up
these processes (Hammer, 1993). Work-teams confront their losses
with a fear of annihilation. In group-analytic terms 'pre-emptive'
outbreaks of sibling rivalry in defence against these narcissistic
injuries lead to a search for group cohesion. Teams display a
propensity for self-idealization and regard it as unsafe to test reality
and grow up. The frightened self identifies with a false we. The true
self is driven underground. So is thinking. Group members
withdraw from a world dominated by coherence, verbalization and
the father, into a pre-verbal dyad with a group mother cast in the
role of victim. Once stuck in this defensive posture, the team
requires the intervention of a good enough leader or consultant to
separate the idealized infant and mother.

   Freud (1913) thought that the loss of an object and mourning are
central to the group formation process. He speculated that the
primal group was formed as a consequence of the siblings killing
the father. According to him the oedipal conflict and patricide are
linked and shape processes of identification, competition, love and
hate in the group. In the state of mourning for the lost object the
group has to re-invent itself by learning to deal with the unknown.

Ernest Becker (1973) has argued that the structure of our personality is rooted in the mechanisms we have developed to cope with mortality and death. It is not surprising, then, that imposed change in organizations produces severe disturbances in the matrix. As group-analytic consultants we would do well to refrain from pathologizing oedipal conflict and outbreaks of sibling rivalry in organizations and treat them instead as the encapsulation of the autistic symptoms connected with the transition from the old to the new.

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