The construction of identity and ‘selfhood’: Glimpses of the relevance of these psychodynamics to work organisations

A paper by

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Abstract

In some earlier work (see Carr, 1994; Carr, 1998; Carr, 1999; Carr & Zanetti, 1999) it has been argued that much of Western thinking has falsely assumes that we are first created as an individual and later form relationships with others – the so-called ‘separation thesis’. This separation thesis seems to be ‘hard wired’ into some schools of psychology. Additionally, it has been noted that the relationship of self and other is one commonly interpreted as a binary, or dichotomous, relationship in which self is generally privileged over other or is in a struggle to dominate other (see Cixous, 1986). Nature without nurture seems meaningless, for example, but often nurture struggles to negate the influence of nature. Self and other are cast as constituent elements in a perceived relationship of the intersubjective nature of the human condition itself, but the implied presumption is that self must necessarily be privileged over other.

This paper puts forward a different and dissenting view: contending that self and other are, of necessity, mutually constituted and no privileged relationship need occur. The relationship of self and other should not be considered as a binary or dichotomous relationship, but rather it should be viewed as a dialectical relationship that appreciates the degree to which the other is both manifested in, and experienced as external to, self. Alternatively expressed, it is being suggested that the relationship of self and other implies an existence which includes the experience of “the extension of self into other, [and] of other into the self: the degree to which the self is experienced as part of the other” (Modell, 1996, p.97). For example, in humanity’s [self’s] quest to dominate nature [other], nature is not completely alien, for humans are also a part of nature [i.e., the self is also other to itself]. Thus, domination of nature can be read as self-mastery and repression (see Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972; Adorno, 1963/1998, pp. 245-258; Benhabib, 1996, p.331). The significance of the self-mastery and repression was an issue that was central to the theorising of Hegel and, indeed in this very context some have suggested that Hegel was “the first intersubjective or relational psychologist (p. 99) … (and who) anticipated many fundamental aspects of the psychology of the self” (Modell, 1996, pp. 99 & 102).
In the work of Hegel, and that of Freud, self and other can be understood as a dialectic relationship through which the psychodynamics of identity formation occur. The symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships of dependence, desire, and control that will be shown as featured in Hegel’s parable of the master and slave have their parallel in the psychodynamic processes and topographical theory of the mind put forward in the work of Freud. Ego and ego-ideal function is a self and other relationship. Through the process of identification, the ego-ideal is established and re-established, and normal narcissistic gratification becomes the driver in the quest to satisfactorily achieve his ideal. In becoming a member of a group, the individual may put to one side their ego-ideal and substitute the group-ideal as embodied in the group leader. Identity is thus in a stage of continual flux as the self and other psychodynamics are played out.

The social construction and production of identity, alluded to above, of course, involves consideration of work organisations as a potent influence. In the work setting, at its most basic level, the individual and the organisation can be thought to function in a self and other relationship. Traditionally the field has viewed this relationship in manner consistent with the precepts of the separation thesis and generally describing the relationship as a form of socialisation. The archetypal depiction of the dynamics of this relationship is that put forward in Edgar Schein’s (1970) concept of the psychological contract. Schein suggested that the psychological contract involved reciprocation (contribution – inducement) where the employee and employer became engaged in an interactive process of mutual influence and bargaining. Schein embraced the work of Etzioni (1961; 1964) to suggest that the forms of employee involvement were a natural outcome of the rewards and kinds of authority used in an organization. What was actually exchanged and the psychodynamics involved were never made clear. The potential for abuse of these processes, is an arena similarly neglected.

The psychodynamics advanced in this paper would suggest the self and other is a largely unconscious dynamic where the idea of seducement is a more appropriate conception than that of mutual influence and negotiation – these latter terms being generally associated with high degrees of consciousness and rationality. The self and other psychodynamics suggest an ongoing re-fashioning of the ego-ideal. Likewise, we might also expect to see the hallmarks of the power of reward and punishment that an organization and its leaders have in enhancing narcissistic gratification of an employee. The employee may raise the organization and/or its leaders to a status similar to that of the ego-ideal. The power ‘loving’, and protected relationship that is the narcissistic underpinning in the creation of the ego-ideal can be met by
the organization and/or its leaders. It is these different psychodynamics, which it will be argued, lead to a more profound understanding of a variety of issues in the workplace – issues which have, thus far, been: misunderstood; only partially captured in our analysis; or, completely obscured from our view as a result of our inadequate theoretical framework. By considering the dialectical nature of the psychodynamics of self and other, we may come to understand and anticipate behaviour in organizations that other frameworks neglect or fail to appreciate – because they have such an inadequate appreciation of the self and other psychodynamic involved in identity formation. Some of the issues that will be raised as an illustration of the usefulness of this newer optic include: compliance/acquiesce in unethical and corrupt behaviour by superordinates; the pervasiveness of sexism; embodiment; and, mourning as part of a change process.

A significant theme that runs throughout the paper is the issue of how the psychodynamics of self, other and identity are open to exploitation. In keeping with the ‘spirit’ of the work of Herbert Marcuse (1955, 1964), the paper will highlight the manner in which these psychodynamics can be manipulated in the workplace. This said, the option of ‘closing off’ other as a strategy to protect the self, is revealed as a dangerous option. It is in this context that the work of Ronald Laing (1960) will be discussed and in particular the concepts of embodiment and ontological security. Laing describes the state of embodiment in the following way:

The individual … may experience his (sic) own being as real, alive, whole; as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question; as a continuum in time; as having an inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness and worth; as spatially co-extensive with the body; and, usually, as having begun in or around birth and liable to extinction with death. He thus has a firm core of ontological security. (p.41-42).

Laing was not making the simple suggested that we have some constancy such as holding the same belief system or ideological outlook, but what is suggested is that we have a constancy within our selves – a sense of identity which gives consciousness the necessary tenacity and coherence to confidently engage with the outside. It is the ontological security, according to Laing, that gives the self this capacity to successfully engage with the external world rather than regarding it as posing a continual threat. Being “as spatially co-extensive with the body” will mean an inner consistency to experience and display anger, passion, jealousy, pain and emotionality in all its guises.
The threat posed by the external world would hold the potential to trigger a schizoid defence in which self and other become dissociated. However, if self and other are a mutually constituted in a dialectic manner, as the paper will suggest, then closing off the outside world also closes off oneself from the developing self and jeopardizes our constancy of being. Indeed, Laing suggested that a lack of ontological security is associated with the psychotic – the specific psychoses: manic-depression, paranoia and schizophrenia. The splitting off and closing down parts of the self and other psychodynamic, clearly has psychological consequences. Attempts to withdraw from the dialectic relationship with other, places the self not only in a situation where, for example, identity cannot be confirmed, but also the ‘joy’ and contentment of the greater completeness [to use Plato’s (circa 358/1996) term and metaphorical meaning], experienced early in life, is also under threat.

To raise this issue of ontological security in the context of the work setting is suggestive of a number of significant questions. To what extent does the organization encourage and make provision for employees to express the range of emotionality in the work setting? What are the boundaries the organization feel are necessary to place upon the genuine expression of emotionality? To what extent to organization members ‘resort’ to employing social defences and adaptive mechanisms (e.g. Humour, story-telling) to control or modulate the inner frustration they feel to a constrained and ‘contained’ genuine self? The discourse of organizational studies, while aware of how an organization may be repressive and inspire regressive employee behaviour, has yet to develop a discourse that acknowledges embodiment and ontological security as potentially a significant psychological health issue. Clearly the psychodynamics of identity formation and ‘selfhood’ should be of concern to the discourse of organisation studies and reflexive management.

References


