Falling in love with investments: A psychoanalytic review of the death instinct in critical management of organizational relationships

Abstract by

Adrian N. Carr
Associate Professor and Principal Research Fellow
Organization Studies & Applied Social Sciences
School of Applied Social and Human Sciences
Email: a.carr@uws.edu.au.

&

Cheryl A. Lapp
President of Labyrinth Consulting
British Columbia, Canada
Email: LabyrinthConsulting@shaw.ca

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Although life and death are of similar implacability, the former is more likely to be an object celebrated and the latter, an object disregarded, by subjects or people in Western society because it seems we value that which reminds us of life; and we try to forget that which reminds us of death (Clack, 2002). A general object-relations view of human experience (Klein, 1975a-d) is based upon two primitive dispositions of relating to objects in the world: one is adoring, caring and loving or reassuring; and the other is comprised of destructiveness, hatred, envy, spite or persecution. The former parallels \textit{Eros}, the class of instincts comprised of life (sex) and self-preservation; and the latter, the class of instincts embodied by destructive behaviors, known as \textit{Thanatos} (Jones, 1957: 295) or the death instinct (Freud, 1920/1984; 1923/1984; Carr, 2003a-b). Both \textit{Eros} and \textit{Thanatos} emanate from the id, which is managed by the ego under the rules and regulations of the superego (Freud, 1923/1984; Carr, 2003a-b).

In Klein’s rendering of primal human relations, the mother or object represents the superego, the newborn’s or ego’s first attachment. Klein believes that the release of instincts from the id always presupposed the object interacting with the ego such that objects and memories or fantasies they trigger are sources of reassurance or persecution as experienced when the infant is separated from the breast. If good breast reminders are triggered, Eros emerges to provide propping (Holbrook, 1971) so as to enact the mother’s holding of the infant between complete isolation from total dependence on the breast (Alford, 1994). Movement toward independence connotes development, which provides connections to expansion or immortality such as that represented by partial identity dissolution in the service of creating something new (Spielrein, 1912/1994; Carr, 2003a-b). Alternatively, if the only triggers are persecutorial bad breast reminders, Thanatos surfaces as purely an instinct of destruction, which is reminiscent of identity death. Object-relations theory is based in fantasies of separation anxiety leading to total dissolution, which manifests itself in various forms of inward and outwardly turned acts of aggression, when the death instinct is not repressed so as to not harm the self or others (Freud, 1920/1984, 1923/1984; Carr, 2003a-b).

Organizations may be perceived to be objects of immortality because “it is the human need to search for deathlessness that helps to erect the edifices of religions and philosophies, the arts, the letters and the sciences to formulate the laws of nature, man and God” (Fraser, 1999, p. 20). Some of Western society’s fastest growing organizations are anthropomorphized heroes because it is believed they confer self-esteem and shape and maintain identity (Alford, 1994) thereby strengthening attachments to other objects such as internal and external shareholders (Becker, 1973/1997). The more
an ‘organization’ is able to keep Thanatos at bay by protecting self-esteem and minimizing death fear, the stronger is the tendency to worship those who defend those values (Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1998). Repression of the death instinct is culturally shaped (Freud, 1920/1984; 1923/1984; Marcuse, 1955; 1964; Carr, 2003a-b): “The mother gives the breast, certainly, but the infant gives the mouth, which is equally necessary to the transaction of suckling. The fact that there is a transfer ... is immaterial to the child’s mind, if the milk comes willingly” (Suttie, 1935, p. 27 italics original emphasis). In Hegelian fashion (Alford, 1994; Carr, 2003c), people value organizations that are perceived to value people. In other words, the tendency is to fall in love with our investments:

Human values are controls on those imaginative powers. They are selective forces that work through symbols. They take the form of collectively approved guidelines for beliefs expressed in terms of truths and untruths, rules for conduct stated in terms of good and evil, and suggestions for the management of emotions offered in terms of judgments on what is beautiful and what is ugly. (Fraser, 1999, p. 20)

When Thanatos overrides Eros, inward and outwardly turned aggressive, destructive behaviors are projected into and around the organization’s environment (Freud, 1920/1984; 1923/1984; Klein, 1975a-d; Alford, 1994; Carr, 2003a-b). The Frankfurt scholar Herbert Marcuse (1955; 1964) argued that reality is predicated on the “performance principle” (1955, p. 44) or the over production of goods and services that, subliminally, transforms wants into values. This parallels unrealistic dependence on transitional objects (Winnicott, 1971/1997) to maintain self-esteem, which can lead to subjugation of employees - and society - into believing that economic scarcity is synonymous with reminders of separation anxiety, should the transfer of milk be disrupted (Suttie, 1935). In order to keep the milk flowing, employees engage in super-revitalization and super-enactment of the mother’s values. For Marcuse, this leads to surplus repression, or the divining “orientation toward individual ego satisfaction here and now” (Didsbury, 2003):

Self-esteem, the belief that one is a valuable member of a meaningful universe, confers a sense of psychological equanimity through death transcendence via symbolic and/or literal immortality. (Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 2003, p. 471)

In organizational life, Manfred Kets de Vries is noted for the study and clinical diagnoses of psychological pathologies affecting organizations (Kets de Vries, 1984; 1991; 1993; 2001). With few exceptions, the idea that death is intertwined with organizational life is an especially foreign concept. Burkard Sievers recognized that “by ignoring death we have lost our frame of life” (Sievers, 1994, p. 56; 1990) because we are likely to split off and ignore both the positive and negative of all we do in the wake of trying to forget about death. Sievers discovers splits between management and workers, which can be likened to warlike attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate the “us against them” or the “kill or be killed” mentality (Sievers, 1999). Yiannis Gabriel suggests that bureaucratic control is a
representation of the death instinct that impedes workers' creativity and perhaps empowerment embodied in the life instinct (Gabriel, 1999). Consideration of the death instinct on subject-object relationships gives us further insights on life and death in and around organizations.

The death instinct is one of the most controversial of all meta-psychological concepts that remains relatively unexplored for its psychoanalytic significance in the social sciences and in organizational studies and management discourses. Drawing upon depth psychology and the work of the critical theorist Herbert Marcuse, we seek to reveal; a) the hidden and subliminal nature of the death instinct; b) the manner in which the individual and group psyches' defend against it; and c) the manner in which these defenses can be manifested in our workplace relationships when we fall in and out of love with organizational investments.

References


