

## Systems-psychodynamics in schools: a framework for EPs undertaking organisational consultancy

Xavier Eloquin

Independent Scholar, Horsham, West Sussex, UK

### ABSTRACT

This article considers how a framework for understanding group and organisational behaviour, systems-psychodynamics, can be utilised by educational psychologists taking up an organisational consultancy role to work with schools as whole systems. It outlines the three main theories that constitute a systems-psychodynamic perspective and considers how the approach has been used by educational psychologists. Two case studies are presented that explore how psychoanalytic concepts such as splitting, projection, use of counter-transference, social defences and others can be applied. Key themes from the case studies are analysed and salient details discussed. The article then discusses implications for practice and further areas of study.

### KEYWORDS

Educational psychology;  
psychoanalytic theory;  
group theory; systems-  
psychodynamics;  
organisational consultancy;  
schools

### Introduction

The aim of this article is to give an outline of systems psychodynamics, an approach to working with organisational and whole-system functioning and dysfunction, and to consider its relevance for educational psychologists (EPs), in terms of developing work at the organisational level in schools. Examples are given of how EPs could apply such a framework to a range of practice areas that can be regarded as legitimately within an EP's remit.

Despite EPs being well placed to work with the organisational concerns of schools and other institutions, there is relatively little mention of it in educational psychology literature. Aubrey (1988) discusses organisational school psychology and consultancy, noting that EPs could contribute at the systemic and strategic level in terms of supporting schools and children with special educational needs (SEN). The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) report (DfEE, 2000) on the role, good practice and future direction of Educational Psychology Services does make fleeting mention of the role EPs can play in informing policy in schools, early years settings and Local Authorities (LAs) but acknowledges that "few schools reported having assistance from their Educational Psychologist in bringing about organisational change" (p. 36). The subsequent report (Woods et al., 2006) into the "Functions and Contributions of Educational Psychologists in England and Wales" notes the strong contribution EPs can make to strategic work and capacity building in schools and in

multi-disciplinary teams as part of the “Every Child Matters” agenda, though as participants, not consultants, to a group process.

The author, when training as an EP, had the opportunity to attend courses designed to sensitise participants to the below-the-surface dynamics of groups and organisations: systems psychodynamics (Neumann, 1999; Fraher, 2004). These included several Group Relations Conferences (see for example, Rice, 1965, Brunner, Nutkevitch, & Sher, 2006) and organisational consultancy courses exploring change management (Hoyle, 2004), group facilitation and one-to-one consultation (Schein, 1987). While these were intended for practising organisational consultants, the author was continually struck by the overlap between many of these new skills and ones already established within an EP’s consultative repertoire, chiefly, for example, the act of consultation (Schein, 1990). The result of these trainings was a desire and resultant opportunity to apply such skills and insights to organisational difficulties in schools.

More recently, it has become clear to the author that, not only is this an activity that can be undertaken by EPs but, also, that there is a considerable need for this type of support in schools, nurseries and other organisations. Given the high level of pressure and scrutiny on schools and school leaders to produce results, it would also seem timely for EPs to embrace this opportunity.

The following section will define and explore the theoretical frameworks that combine to create systems-psychodynamics.

## Definition

Systems psychodynamics is an amalgam of three distinct but related theories, with emergent properties of its own. Indeed, the phrase itself emerged only relatively recently (Neumann, 1999). Fraher (2004, p. 1) describes systems psychodynamics as “an inter-disciplinary field that integrates three disciplines; the practice of psychoanalysis, the theories of Group Relations and Open Systems perspectives”. As a whole it refers to “the collective psychological behaviour” within and between groups and organisations (Neuman, 1999, p. 57). Another way of describing it might be to say that it is concerned with the unconscious, “below the surface” aspects of individuals as members of organisations, groups and teams. Gould, Stapley, and Stein (2001) develop this further: “systems” refers to concepts, chiefly from open systems theory (discussed later), that “provide the dominant framing perspective for understanding the aspects of an organisational system” (p. 2). These include: organisational design, division of labour, levels of authority, nature of tasks, processes, aims, primary tasks, and types of boundary in and around the organisation.

“Psychodynamic” describes psychoanalytic theories, chiefly drawing from the Object Relations school (Waddell, 1998), that are to do with individual, unconscious processes. These include the functions and processes a person brings to work, or more accurately to role, and which can, should the system not account for basic human needs, interfere and obstruct more effective, efficient and, importantly, meaningful engagement.

The three theoretical bases of systems psychodynamics are presented in turn.

## Psychoanalysis

The central assertion by Freud (Freud, 1920; Halton, 1994; Solms, 2015) that an individual has an unconscious mind and that this shapes, to a greater or lesser extent, their behaviour

is a fundamental principle of psychoanalysis and systems psychodynamics. In its most basic form, Freud's premise is that experiences from our past (infancy and childhood) can exert an influence on present functioning that is below our conscious awareness. The task of psychoanalysis is to help the individual discern some of these hidden patterns and ultimately relieve them of their power. However, confronting painful emotional "truths" is often not a welcome experience and proximity to them, so psychoanalytic theory holds, triggers anxiety (McLeod, 2009). To manage this anxiety and to permit the ego to function without becoming overwhelmed, either by primitive urges deriving from the id or crippling super-ego judgements, defence mechanisms of various types are deployed (McLeod, 2009).

Understanding anxiety is, therefore, a key part of psychoanalysis and systems psychodynamics, as are the defence mechanisms mobilised to manage it. These might include denial, repression, displacement, idealisation-denigration and many others (see Vaillant and Vaillant, 1986, for a full exposition). Chief among these defence mechanisms, and those most developed in systems-psychodynamics, are the related processes of splitting, projection and projective identification (Klein, 1946; Hinshelwood, 1994; Pellegrini, 2010). In systems psychodynamics the task, or aspects of it, is postulated to be a cause of anxiety which leads to group or organisational defences, known as social defences, which serve to lessen the anxiety of the task. Hirschhorn (1988), for example, describes a social defence system at play in a nuclear power plant. Engineers often ridiculed the quality assurance monitors who required them to complete paperwork demonstrating safety checks had been completed. Through interview and observation he formulated a process in which the monitors' presence reminded the engineers of the potential dangers of their task, creating overwhelming anxiety. By denigrating their job to "nit-picking" they were able to reduce anxiety levels, although at a potentially horrific cost.

The first major studies undertaken by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations examined social defence systems in industry (Jaques, 1953) and as a cause for trainee nurse drop-out in a teaching hospital (Menzies, 1960). Recently, Tucker (2015) has explored social defences in primary schools as a result of internal and external pressures experienced by head teachers. Defence mechanisms provide short-term relief from anxiety but, ultimately, may end up being counter-productive as the gap between external and internal "reality" increases.

In her clinical work with children, Klein (Hinshelwood, 1994) built on and departed from Freud's model of id-ego-superego, developing Object Relations theory. Klein discerned two qualitatively different states of mind: the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position (Hinshelwood, 1994). The theory asserts that in infancy and early childhood the world is split into "good" and "bad". Unmet needs, such as hunger or cold, are experienced as attacks by a denying "bad" carer, rather than the more sophisticated conception of a busy carer being elsewhere. Such experiences evoke very strong emotions such as hatred, rage or envy, which initially are too powerful for the infant to tolerate. As a way of managing this, the source of the distressing and destructive emotions is "outsourced" and located outside the infant. This came to be called the "paranoid-schizoid" position (Segal, 1988, p. 35): paranoid because of the felt experience of being attacked; schizoid because the world is split into strict duality, for example, good-bad.

Klein describes a process where these unbearable emotions are split off and projected out of the child and onto another (Segal, 1988). Once a feeling is split off and projected, a final important process occurs: projective identification. This is a process with a multiplicity of meanings functioning, sometimes simultaneously, as a defence against unwanted feelings

(by projecting them out of the self), a type of relationship and as a form of communication, in which the recipient comes to experience something of the emotional state of the projector (Klein, 1946; Ogden, 1982; Moustaki-Smilansky, 1994; Waddell, 1998).

In an infant–mother dyad the process of splitting, projection and projective identification might run as follows: the infant experiences, but cannot name, a feeling of hunger. Rather, he (in this example the infant has been designated “he” to distinguish from the mother) experiences himself as being attacked by hunger and is flooded with terror and uncertainty. The mother is thus experienced as intentionally denying herself and giving free rein to hunger. These feelings are too much for the infant and are split off and exported (projected) out (Moustaki-Smilansky, 1994).

At this point, the mother becomes the recipient for these projected feelings and she is identified as being the cause: in essence, “mother is making me feel like this”. Here, projective identification (Moustaki-Smilansky, 1994) is used as a defence against distressing, overwhelming feelings, by locating them temporarily in someone else. A second stage occurs when the projected emotion can either be acted on unthinkingly or it can be made sense of. A mother might feel fear, identify it as her own, begin to panic and misjudge the cause of distress, something that the infant experiences as not being understood, thereby increasing distress. However, with experience, she may intuit the real reason, holding on to her capacity to “think under fire” (Young, 2005, p. 3) and respond thoughtfully: “aah, you’re hungry”. To take it a step further, she might track her own emotional state of confusion back to the infant and begin to comfort or contain, as if saying, through physical comfort and care, “you have never felt hunger before (having been in my womb) and it is a terrifying feeling”. It is in the last manifestation that projective identification can be used as a form of communication, a form of emotional information about the situation, whether it be in a relationship, therapy or organisational consultancy (Emmanuel, 1997; Gilmore & Krantz, 1985).

When a developing ego has enough experience of “good enough” care, it can, at the developmentally appropriate stage, move to the second of the two stages described by Klein: the depressive position (Waddell, 1998; Klein, 1935). Here, the child is able to recognise such vengeful impulses and feelings as his own and the awareness and fear that these impulses might come true and actually cause harm, lead to depressive guilt and reparation. In its simplest depiction, the depressive position is one in which an individual can bear to think about and acknowledge desires, wishes and feelings that might have been projected out in the paranoid-schizoid phase. It leads away from viewing events in a binary form (good–bad, for example), and towards the ability to tolerate complexity and uncertainty.

A final concept, the “container–contained” relationship (Symbington & Symbington, 1996, p. 50), describes the parent, manager or organisation’s ability to hold the projected feelings, make sense of them and return them to their source in a digestible manner, rather than interpreting them as a trigger to often quite reactive and punitive action. For the growing child this might entail the parent or caregiver making sense of rage at not getting what he wants and drip-feeding back an awareness that “yes, it can be very upsetting not getting what you want.” An organisational analogue might be the capacity for managers to hold on to and respond thoughtfully and compassionately to workers’ rage during times of redundancy. In both cases, containment shapes the maternal or organisational holding environment (Stapely, 2006). In either instance it increases the capacity to think, to reflect, and to be slightly freer from unconscious processes.

## Group Relations

The second strand of systems-psychodynamics is that of Group Relations theory, which has dual origins: growing out of psychoanalytic theory, chiefly through the work of Bion (1961), and through the work of Lewin (1947), who was the originator of the term “group dynamics.” Bion (1961) elaborated an approach to groups informed by his experiences with individual psychoanalysis. His work led him to postulate that groups can be conceived of as discrete entities, different in form and function from the individuals comprising them. Furthermore, groups operate on two levels: at one level, a group gathers together to complete a task or undertake an activity: the sophisticated or work group (W). At the same time there exists the basic assumption (BA) group. Constituting the same members as the work group, this group manifests in behaviours that are designed to alleviate group anxiety and may well run counter to the aims of the W group. Thus, when faced with an anxiety raising situation, a group may appear to be operating in a rational manner but actually its behaviour and decision-making processes are intended to reduce anxiety in the group, regardless of the task. Bion identified three main types of BA group (for consistency all further references to BA are in upper case with their subordinate category, for example, d for dependency, in lower case):

- Dependency (BA<sub>d</sub>). This exists where “one person is always felt to be in the position to supply the needs of the group and the rest in a position in which their needs are supplied ... having thrown all their cares on the leader, they sit back and wait for him (sic) to solve all their problems” (Bion, 1961, pp. 74–82). In such a group, the ambience is one in which all thinking and action is assumed to originate in the leader. A recent example from the author’s work was an exasperated head teacher exclaiming of her leadership team: “They all rely on me to do things! They never act on their own initiative”. A leader who fails to serve the needs of a BA<sub>d</sub> group, who in fact tries to bring them to face reality, is in danger of being marginalised, ignored or even deposed.
- Pairing (BA<sub>p</sub>). In such a mode, a group would invest all its hope in a pairing which might produce a solution. The pairing may involve members present or absent and of either gender, but the flavour is very much that some miracle union will resolve the issue and free the group of its anxiety at some point in the future. A recurring example of this is in multi-disciplinary meetings around seemingly insoluble cases, where all professionals feel overwhelmed by the painful situation and their own impotence to “do” anything. Suddenly a solution manifests: the psychologist can meet with the social worker (not present) and work out a plan of action. Relief fills the room, the sense of some decisive action having taken place, when in fact any attempt at meaningful problem-solving has simply been deferred.
- Fight/flight (BA<sub>f</sub>). In such an instance the group is mobilised to either attack or run away, and expects its leader to facilitate this. The enemy may be someone in the room, elsewhere or another group. The attack or flight may be more or less pronounced. Once the “other” has been identified, all energy is dedicated to fighting the enemy or making the threat dissipate. Thus, in a similar meeting to the one described above, conversation might quickly turn to blaming the absent social worker, or indeed social services as a whole, for the perceived fact that nothing can be done. The emotional energy invested in disparaging the absent social worker gives the group a spurious sense of unity and certainty.

In each of the basic assumptions, the main point is that all activity is now in the service of lowering and displacing anxiety, rather than working towards the aims of the W group.

A final contribution from Bion to group work is his use of his own feelings, his counter-transference experiences, to infer what might be at play in the group (Fraher, 2004). Working as a consultant in the systems-psychodynamic tradition allows for the use of feelings to guide one's thoughts and actions. The ongoing challenge is to discern what feelings belong to the consultant and what to the system, and to consider the meaning of what is projected into the former, thereby allowing it to be used as "intelligence" (Armstrong, 2005) about what is at play in the organisation. The use of feelings as data is a difficult concept to grapple with and, initially, to use. However, in the systems-psychodynamic tradition, feelings are used as part of the data set allowing for a working hypothesis to be developed and tested (Armstrong, 2005). This is considered further in the examples below.

The second theoretical root of group relations comes from the work of Lewin (1947). Lewin was dedicated to defining a scientific method and language for psychology as a distinct science in its own right (Marrow, 1969). Developing his theory of fields and forces and applying it to groups and individuals, Lewin was able to demonstrate that the group could be an intelligible field of study (for example, Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; Coch & French, 1948). Lewin's development of experiential learning with the National Training Laboratory sowed the seeds for the development of Group Relations Conferences, first run in the UK in 1959 (Miller, 1990). It is at such conferences that participants explore the way they behave, how others experience them, and also observe group-as-a-whole behaviours in *the here-and-now*.

### **Open Systems theory**

The third strand of systems-psychodynamics, Open Systems theory, draws on von Bertalanffy's (1969) study of open systems in biology, applying it to social systems. Rice (1953) elaborated this idea in relation to organisations, refining key points of the theory and interweaving the psychoanalytic and group relations theories mentioned above. The key features are as follows:

- Organisations, like any living entity, are open systems. They take in elements from outside themselves, transform them and then release them. Typically, organisations, including schools, present themselves as closed systems. Often this is presented as a hierarchical diagram with the head at the top and little or no reference to the student population. Such representations fail to capture the dynamic through flow of a system; that without Year 7 students arriving and Year 11 students leaving, the school would not exist. It also denies the existence of the emotional and psychological dynamics at play, which, arguably, are the very life of the school.
- Boundaries; in order to effect a transformation of inputs into outputs, a permeable boundary or boundary region around the system is needed. Systems psychodynamics places great emphasis on leadership as a boundary activity, deciding what is allowed into a system, where it will go to (through delegation) and monitoring the flow of inputs and outputs. Too tight a boundary and eventually the system will die. Too open and task activities within the system get derailed.
- The primary task; this is defined as "the task the system must carry out in order to survive" (Roberts, 1994, p. 29) and to which all sub-systems must be aligned. Clarity of primary

task ensures the highest level of output, yet this is not always easy to ensure, especially in the messy business of managing human beings, as opposed to raw materials. Inevitably, if leadership and management are not clear, different sub-systems construe their own primary tasks and this can lead to conflict and even organisational breakdown.

The next section will review the research literature, focusing on the application of systems-psychodynamics in schools by EPs and others.

### Systems-psychodynamics, EPs and schools

There is scant reference in the literature to EPs using a systems-psychodynamic, or even a psychoanalytic, approach to aspects of individual, group or organisational life. Pellegrini (2010) explores the processes of splitting, projection and projective identification in two case studies. His first case study considers projective processes in a parent/school consultation, in which negative feelings are located in the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo). Pellegrini describes his own emotional state and offers some hypotheses about what may be occurring. The second case study, a training session for teaching assistants, widens the application of these processes, exploring what his feeling of “failing his audience” might mean. He uses his feelings as data and this is triangulated by complementary feelings in the audience. Pellegrini demonstrates how an awareness of projective processes can be used to make sense of, explore and ultimately help others to understand feelings in a system.

Dennison, McBay, and Shaldon (2006) consider the contribution EPs can make to multi-professional teams. They draw on several theoretical frameworks including psychodynamic, systemic and social constructionist theories. While they reference facets of psychodynamic theory the approach is not explicitly a systems-psychodynamic one.

Sutoris (2000) uses a systems-psychodynamic approach in describing a piece of work with a secondary school that reported behaviour as a concern. He builds on key concepts such as authority (Obholzer, 1994), role (Reed and Armstrong, 1988), transition across boundaries and primary task (Roberts, 1994) and considers the question of what is the key task of a school. Baxter (2000) describes a similar problem with behaviour in a primary school. She describes taking up an action research methodology to explore symptomatic problems of behaviour management, drawing on the theory of social defence mechanisms (Menzies, 1960), as well as ideas from systemic family therapy (Cecchin, 1987).

Three other papers also apply aspects of systems-psychodynamic theory to schools. Tucker (2010) employs the heuristic tool of the “organisation-in-mind” (Armstrong, 2005) to explore what effects the changing political landscape is having on head teachers in terms of how they construe their role and how they manage the resulting stress. Tucker identifies two models of leadership, an older “master-teacher” and the newer “business manager” model, and notes that societal demands placed on head teachers, their own biographies, and the isolation of the role make stress and burn-out likely risks.

Hinshelwood (2009) explores how unconscious processes shape culture and practice in education, highlighting the strong links between psychoanalysis and education pre- and post-World War II. He goes on to wonder at the lack of attention psychoanalysis has given education since then. Dunning, James, and Jones (2005) explore splitting and projection in schools at the group and organisational level. They use a case study method, taking a

psychoanalytic and open-systems perspective to explore three instances of splitting and projection between groups such as teachers and the senior leadership team.

Outside the world of education the theoretical development and practical application of systems-psychodynamics has a long and distinguished tradition. Pioneering studies explored worker–manager relations (Jaques, 1953), trainee nurse disaffection and drop out (Menzies, 1960) and increasing productivity in newly mechanised coal mines (Trist & Bamforth, 1951), all stemming from what became the Tavistock Institute. In the latter study, developing the concept of a “socio-technical system”, the researchers were able to demonstrate significantly increased productivity and decreased absenteeism.

Rice (1953) used a similar approach in an Indian cotton mill and was able to demonstrate increased production levels over time, while also introducing more democratic working relations and higher wage structures. The application of systems-psychodynamics is exhibited in a wide range of subject matter including, for example: supporting the Norwegian Labour Party following the attacks in Oslo and Utoya (Bugge, 2015); the US Airline industry after 9/11 (Fraher, 2014) and risk management as a social defence in banking in a high risk African country (Geldenhuys, Levin, & van Niekerk, 2012).

In *Social Defences against Anxiety* (Armstrong & Rustin, 2015) authors have described work with lawyers (Stokes, 2015), MBA (Master of Business Administration) students (Lucey, 2015), Youth Offending Services (de Sauma, Fielding, & Rustin, 2015), and social work education (Finch & Schaub, 2015) to name but a few. In short, the field of systems-psychodynamics is rich and varied and less esoteric than EPs might assume.

The next section discusses two case studies (pseudonyms have been used), applying systems-psychodynamics to schools as whole systems. The first case study explores the discussed phenomena of splitting (Pellegrini, 2010), basic assumption behaviour (Bion, 1961) and lack of clear primary task (Roberts, 1994). The second study considers how emotional experience can be utilised in developing a working hypothesis to use in consultation with a senior management team (SMT) (Armstrong, 2005). It also explores how the school’s behaviour policy became a social defence system for the SMT, protecting it from unpalatable “truths” encountered by teaching staff. All names and places have been changed to ensure anonymity.

### **Case Study 1: conflict as a result of ill-defined primary task**

Manor Hall School was a residential school for children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). It was licensed to accommodate and educate children from 10 to 16 years of age. The school had three main departments, all of which reported to Gary, the principal:

- Education, run by Danny, managing a team of eight teachers and teaching assistants.
- Care, with Arthur as Head of Care. Arthur managed three homes with a staff of 22.
- Therapy, which included a psychiatrist, EP, psychotherapist, occupational therapist and art therapist.

Initially the author was asked to undertake a number of psychological assessments, support teaching staff through consultation and to jointly work with therapy colleagues. Very soon, however, Gary became keen for the therapy team to organise an away day for the SMT to work on “vision and ethos”, something that never transpired. At the same time, in their



fortnightly review meetings, Gary and the author continually found themselves moving off agenda and discussing the various conflicts between staff and the disconnection between policy and practice. The author offered Gary consultation around some of the issues raised, chiefly the dynamics of the SMT, which was readily accepted.

Two examples serve as an illustration of some of the dynamics:

- One student became violent, causing serious injury to two staff. With school staff struggling to manage the situation, Sam, a member of care staff was asked for help. He responded to Danny "I don't take orders from you" and walked off.
- In one-to-one consultation with Gary, we discussed his on-going disagreements over policy with Danny: "if he ever crosses me again I'll kill him".

Within the school the conflicts were taken at the personal level and threatened to undermine the viability of the whole system. In one of the consultation meetings the impact of poor SMT relationships on the system at large was recognised and Gary agreed to hold a series of SMT process meetings that the author would facilitate. This was something that had to be thought about carefully and all three members of the SMT were consulted prior to the first meeting.

The first session was tense but all three managers were able to take part in a historical reconstruction of their experiences at Manor Hall. Arthur and Danny had been there before Gary and spoke with feeling of the long-term political turmoil prior to his arrival. Both had had to find political "protectors" and had ended up aligned against each other by dint of these alliances. As they explored this it became clear that there was very little that was actually personal. Rather, the school had been an aimless "paranoogenic zoo" (Jaques, 1953) with a lack of structure and shared vision. It had lacked the necessary systemic boundaries and had no sense of a shared primary task.

From this point on they had formulated their roles as defenders of their respective departments and staff teams: to protect themselves and their departments from the general organisational chaos. Gary was then able to talk of his arrival, the chaos and enmity he witnessed and how he felt he was continually being pulled into taking sides with Danny or Arthur, something he did not always manage with impartiality. The act of talking in this way, whilst a small step, did signal a move to a different way of thinking: as a group they were able to acknowledge their mistrust of each other in an impersonal, at times forensic, manner and recognise how this was having an impact on the school-as-a-whole. Over a series of five, monthly process meetings the group began to make links between their personal experiences and the wider system. The author presented brief theory inputs based on the theories discussed earlier. Trust, or its lack, was a recurring theme and on several occasions there were opportunities to work through a current issue, accompanied by much strong feeling, within the containing boundaries of the session. The role of the EP as facilitator and consultant to group processes was important here, as it provided a safe holding environment for these discussions. Over time, there was a perceptible shift in how they experienced and responded to interpersonal and intra-group conflict, moving from the personal frame (dislike of the other) to an organisational one (as role holders representing respective departments, keeping them safe). At times it was important to help them hold this latter view in spite of strong personal feelings. They were able to present a more unified front to the staff and even dealt with some contentious staffing issues without reverting back to less helpful processes.

### Analysis

This was a complex system with which the author, in varying capacities, was engaged for several years. At times it was very stressful and emotional. Taking a systems-psychodynamics perspective enabled him to make use of these strong feelings to develop hypotheses, keep in role, and ultimately to offer an intervention which gave other role holders a larger, less personal frame with which to make sense of events. Key observations include:

- Evidence of chronic splitting and projection between individuals and groups, specifically Care and Education. This defence gave short-term release from anxieties aroused by the needs of the troubled and aggressive students (“not my problem, I can walk away”) but set up continued friction between care and education that was counter-productive in the long term. The behaviour and the feelings evoked indicated that individuals in the organisation were operating from the paranoid-schizoid position, as if the purpose was to find and blame others.
- In terms of group dynamics, there was an evident Basic Assumption fight/flight which manifested between Care and Education as departments and in the SMT between managers of the respective departments. The wider organisational dynamic was obscured by instances of personal and even tribal animosity, which then perpetuated a narrative of conflict and mistrust.
- When a system has an unclear or no primary task, structures are often manipulated to manage anxieties. The historic chaos and tension had led departments to define their primary tasks in terms of survival and isolation and this subsequently shaped group and individual attitudes. The care-worker’s response to the crisis in school was a prime example.
- In a dysfunctional system the only point of sentience is a human being and dysfunction can only be registered in thought and emotion. It is then all too easy to experience conflict at the personal and not the systemic level.
- Sub-systems are often tasked with carrying out a function on behalf of the whole system. One realisation the therapy team had was that they were being asked to do the thinking about the system that no-one else wanted to or could do.
- Working with senior management as a team was not easy. There was understandable resistance, compounded by the fact that there was always a range of competing demands for their time. To their credit, the SMT did persist and recognised that there was something changing in how they related as role-holders. While there was a personal benefit, the systemic effect was to send a signal to the system at large that the SMT were *working together*.

It was in the last few months that Gary, Danny and Arthur were able to really unite, develop shared ways of working and articulate a clearer, unified primary task. It is not uncommon for existing rivalries to be put aside when a new threat emerges, allowing the group to locate new enemies and thereby split and project difficult feelings out of the system, freeing them to work more productively. The sadness was that it revealed what the three role holders were capable of when not in conflict with each other. Thus, it can be said that systems operating in paranoid-schizoid and basic assumption mind-sets rob themselves of their own potential.

### **Case Study 2: emotion as “data” in a secondary school intervention**

A maintained secondary school was at risk of having its behaviour management deemed “inadequate” at the next Ofsted inspection. As part of a wider support network the author was asked by the LA to support the school in examining its behaviour policy and practice. The school was part of a newly built community and its first cohort was now its Year 11. Prior to students arriving, the young SMT had planned a “completely different” school and ethos. For example, detentions were called “sort-it-outs”, the underlying premise being a conflict resolution style of discussion between teachers and students, and homework was known as “lbl” (learning beyond lessons). Despite this idealistic ethos, behaviour was considered a significant concern by the majority of staff and students interviewed. A major complaint by staff was that senior managers did very little to discipline students and they had to resort to managing it themselves often by “parking” misbehaving students in each other’s classrooms. The students were equally unhappy: “it’s a detention, so why not call it a f\*\*\*ing detention? It’s either that or they send us away after two minutes”.

The author offered to hold some reading seminars and training sessions on behaviour for teachers, as well as undertaking an analysis of what was happening to present to the SMT. The first session did not go well. The group, some 20 or so, sat in embarrassed silence; no-one had read the articles. At this point the author became aware of a rising rage and desire to tell them off. Instead of doing so, he described his feelings and offered the group a working hypothesis: that the group was hoping he would become angry and strict and treat them as they believed a good teacher would treat a recalcitrant class or student. The author invited the group to explore this hypothesis and they were able to describe feelings of impotence and fears of incompetence in relation to managing behaviour and anger at the lack of support from the SMT.

Taken at the group level this episode serves as a classic example of Basic Assumption dependency: a presumption that the author could produce a solution for them. However, it also served as valuable emotional data about the state of the system as a whole, something which enabled the author to make sense of the SMT’s inability to support its staff. In a subsequent meeting with the SMT, the author fed back various findings (qualitative and quantitative) and included the hypothesis that they had invested much energy in creating a school unlike any other. That this was now failing was almost too painful to bear, as it required them to give up the ideal they had planned for and instead face the reality before them. To do so, they would need to sacrifice some of the idealism that had informed the school’s inception. By not mobilising the necessary authority, they were avoiding reality and causing staff to develop their own ways of managing behaviour, which further devalued the behaviour policy.

#### **Analysis**

Such work is often complex and has multiple points of reference and interpretation. From this vignette, certain points can be made:

- The original impetus behind the behaviour policy, whilst laudable, can be seen as a social defence against unpalatable realities: that students may not like what is offered in a school or lesson and may not see a need to conform to school rules. At a deeper level, it can be hypothesised that the idealistic behaviour policy was a way for the

young and inexperienced SMT to avoid taking up the type of authority senior teachers are required to take up. They planned for an ideal student so they would not have to face the demands and challenges of “real” students with all that chaos, ingratitude and adolescent pre-occupation.

- There was a split between class teachers who were confronted by a challenging reality and had no authority to change it and the SMT who had authority but struggled to use it.
- The use of feelings in the counter-transference (the emotional response in the training) helped to “make sense” of the vast amount of cognitive data amassed through interviews and observations. When supported by other forms of data, it allowed for a richer, deeper hypothesis, a missing piece of a complex puzzle. By being inducted into the feeling-state of the system the author was able to experience what it was the class teachers needed from their managers: a firm, consistent boundary/container that modelled ways of managing challenging behaviour.
- In consultative work, the use of working hypotheses frees up conversation. They are not intended as definitive comments but invitations to think in a different way. This was powerfully demonstrated when the author shared the hypothesis about the idealised school in the SMT meeting. The newest member (who had not been there at the start) was able to say he disagreed with the policy and also that he had felt unable to say so before now, as others were so clearly invested in it.

This intervention led to a more frank exchange about behaviour within the SMT. It allowed for a shift in how the SMT viewed the school and they were able to face more honestly their role in perpetuating a split between management and class-room teachers that perpetuated poor student behaviour. At the next Ofsted inspection they were rated safely in the satisfactory band for behaviour, although it is important to recognise it was part of a coordinated response by the LA to support the school.

## Discussion

In both cases there was a high degree of dysfunction and discord. In approaching such problem situations, it is useful to have a sense of where and at what level the problem is primarily located. The level of analysis can be the individual, group, inter-group, organisational or societal. Working from the systems-psychodynamics perspective allows one to consider various possibilities and work at the level where change can occur optimally. In the first case study it was tempting to work at the level of the individual, offering coaching and other corrective measures (indeed there was a strong drive to get Danny fired, as if this would solve the problem). Widening the lens to include the organisation’s history and lack of structure helped make sense of individual and inter-group behaviour and led to a shift in how the SMT related to each other, ultimately affecting how they responded to organisational problems and formulated, together, a shared primary task.

In the second case study, the author was able to make sense of counter-transference experiences with the staff group to develop a hypothesis about how the young and inexperienced SMT had used the behaviour policy as a social defence against the reality of running a large secondary school.

In both cases, the author, working as an EP, was able to take up a role that generated insight, opportunities for reflection and ultimately a shift in relationship within the two

leadership teams. It is the author's assertion that many of the skills used in this type of organisational work are part of EPs' existing skill-set, chiefly the act of consultation. What is missing is perhaps the recognition that this type of work is needed and can be valued by schools and other organisations, but also that EPs could be doing such work. EP activities include considerable consultative work with parents, teachers, teaching assistants and others but, perhaps, less with head teachers, senior managers and the organisation as a whole. As discussed in the introduction, it is recognised that EPs have the ability and the remit to work at the organisational level but there is little evidence of it actually happening: could this be an activity that EPs offer more often to schools and other organisations?

Certainly, there is an indication of the need existing for some form of psychological support and facilitation for school leaders and managers (Phillips, Sen, & McNamee, 2007). Recent legislation (Academies Act, 2010) has, arguably, brought greater freedom to some school leaders (Vaughan, 2010). At the same time, pressures from Ofsted, the Department for Education (DfE), governing bodies and Academy Trusts for schools to produce ever-better results has made group and organisational functioning an issue that cannot be ignored. Often there is little opportunity for individuals and groups (at whatever level) in schools to reflect and make sense of such pressures, which leads invariably to certain types of enactment, such as those described earlier. In such cases, no-one benefits, least of all students, who might then experience school as an ever-increasing source of anxiety.

Systems-psychodynamics, as an approach that recognises anxiety and the defences against it, has the ability to make sense of, and alleviate, some of the causes of systemic stress and dysfunction in schools. EPs, with their consultative skill-set, are well placed to offer consultation at this level, and to support head teachers and leadership teams with the difficult task of managing a school. Supporting leaders and leadership teams is not an isolated act but, rather, affects a range of factors that preoccupy schools and those who work in them, including organisational culture (Lewin et al., 1939; Litwin & Stringer, 1966; Barker, 2001), employee morale and job satisfaction (Elizabeth, 1999; Tsai, 2011), and motivation and performance (Thorlindsson, 1987; Ogbonna & Harris, 2000). In short, work at this level can be a significant means of improving the outcomes and emotional well-being of a school community as a whole. It would, for this reason alone, be interesting and informative to survey the prevalence of EPs undertaking organisationally orientated interventions, including the application of alternative paradigms to the system-psychodynamic model considered here, and this is certainly an opportunity for further research.

In terms of systems-psychodynamics research, schools are a relatively unexplored set of institutions that would benefit from being studied further, not least because of the complex task of requiring large numbers of people to not only conform but actively engage with the activity of learning. That the only other institutions with a similar authority-to-follower ratio are places like prisons, hospitals and factories only serves to highlight the challenges inherent in schools. Much of the published research focuses on splitting and projection. However, group relations theory has much to say about class-room and whole school group dynamics and this has not been explored fully. Some have commented on social defence systems in residential settings (Miller & Gwynne, 1979; Menzies, 1979) but, with the exception of Tucker (2015), there have not been explicit studies of social defence mechanisms in larger, mainstream settings.

Given that schools are where EPs typically “do” psychology, the opportunity to apply a psychological lens to the entire system is something the profession might consider more fully. It is certainly a field occupational psychology has historically tended to neglect (Montgomery & Kehoe, 2010). What is striking from this author’s (and others’) experiences is the way that splitting and projective processes can so powerfully disrupt rational thinking, especially when the “client” population (children at various developmental stages) are already using adults to receive and contain a wide range of projections related to change and growth. This is useful knowledge for EPs who are often a receptacle for all forms of projection, from impotence to omniscience. Knowledge of such processes allows one to keep in role and to develop appropriate interventions.

A final point to note is that hypotheses derived from emotional data need to be supported by other forms of data, such as observations and interviews. Freud warned against what he termed “wild analysis” (Freud, 1909). Data needs to be carefully and thoughtfully worked into a hypothesis. The value of this way of working is in inviting others to become more reflective, not in appearing to be right oneself. In this respect, supervision is vital in that it allows one to stay thoughtful and able to tolerate the considerable uncertainty that accompanies work at the group and whole-system level.

## Conclusion

In this article, through the use of two case studies, some of the ways that systems-psychodynamic theory can be used by EPs and others to make sense of organisational behaviour in schools have been explored. It was further demonstrated how this kind of intervention can be used both to keep practitioners in role and as a method of consulting to the organisation. Finally some of the ways systems-psychodynamics can be taken forward in schools as well as some of the pitfalls that may befall practitioners using this way of working were discussed.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following: Simon Tucker, Carol Greenway and James Osborne for their advice and support at different points along the way. And, as ever, Sara, for so much.

## References

- Academies Act. (2010). Retrieved from [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/1937/pdfs/uksi\\_20101937\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/1937/pdfs/uksi_20101937_en.pdf)
- Armstrong, D. (2005). Emotions in organizations; disturbance or intelligence? in *Organization in the mind. Psychoanalysis, group relations and organisational consultancy*. Occasional papers 1989-2003. London: Karnac Books.
- Armstrong, D., & Rustin, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Social Defences against Anxiety: Explorations in a Paradigm*. London: Karnac Books.
- Aubrey, C. (1988). Organisational school psychology and school consultancy. In N. Jones & J. Sayer (Eds.), *Management and the psychology of schooling*. London: Falmer Press.
- Barker, B. (2001). Do leaders matter? *Educational Review*, 53(1), 65–76.
- Baxter, J. (2000). Theme consultancy – exploring organisational themes to symptomatic problems of behaviour management in a primary school. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 17(1), 33–49.
- Bion, W. R. (1961). *Experiences in groups and other papers*. London: Tavistock Publications.

- Brunner, L., Nutkevitch, A., & Sher, M. (Eds.). (2006). *Belgirate I: Group Relations conferences: Reviewing and exploring theory, design, role-taking and application,,* Vol. I. London: Karnac Books.
- Bugge, R. (2015). Using an organisational perspective to intervene when disaster strikes: Learning from experience following the terror attacks in Norway on 22 July, 2011. *Organisational and Social Dynamics*, 15(1), 101–116.
- Cecchin, G. (1987). Hypothesizing, circularity, and neutrality revisited: An invitation to curiosity. *Family Process*, 26(4), 405–413.
- Coch, L., & French, J. R. P. (1948). Overcoming resistance to change. *Human Relations*, 1, 512–532.
- Dennison, A., McBay, C., & Shaldon, C. (2006). Every team matters: The contribution educational psychologists can make to effective teamwork. *Educational & Child Psychology*, 23(4), 80–90.
- Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (2000). *Educational Psychology Services (England): Current role, good practice and future directions*. The Report of the Working Group. London: HMSO.
- De Sauma, M., Fielding, S., & Rustin, R. (2015). Unconscious defences against anxiety in a Youth Offending Service. In D. Armstrong & M. Rustin (Eds.), *Social defences against anxiety: Explorations in a paradigm*. London: Karnac Books.
- Dunning, G., James, C., & Jones, N. (2005). Splitting and projection at work in schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 43(3), 244–259.
- Elizabeth, A. (1999). The changing nature of nurses' job satisfaction: An exploration of the sources of satisfaction in the 1990s. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 30(1), 150–158.
- Emmanuel, L. (1997). The nature and function of projection and projective identification: From evacuation to communication. *British Journal of Projective Psychology*, 42(1), 39–54.
- Finch, J., & Schaub, J. (2015). Projective identification and unconscious defences against anxiety: Social work education, practice learning and the fear of failure. In D. Armstrong & M. Rustin (Eds.), *Social defences against anxiety: Explorations in a paradigm*. London: Karnac Books.
- Fraher, A. (2004). *A history of group study and psychodynamic organizations*. London: Free Association Books.
- Fraher, A. (2014). The manic culture of the post 9/11 airline industry in America. *Organisational and Social Dynamics*, 14(1), 53–75.
- Freud, S. (1909). *Selected papers on Hysteria and other Psychoneuroses*. New York, NY: The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company.
- Freud, S. (1920). *An introduction to psychoanalysis*. New York, NY: Boni and Liveright.
- Geldenhuis, D. J., Levin, M., & van Niekerk, A. (2012). Risk management as a social defence against anxiety. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 38(2), 65–74.
- Gilmore, T. L., & Krantz, J. (1985). Projective identification in the consulting relationship: Exploring the unconscious dimensions of a client system. *Human Relations*, 38(12), 1159–1177.
- Gould, L., Stapley, L., & Stein, M. (2001). *The systems psychodynamics of organizations: Integrating the Group Relations approach, psychoanalytic and Open Systems perspectives*. London: Karnac Books.
- Halton, W. (1994). Some unconscious aspects of organisational life. Contributions from psychoanalysis. In A. Obholzer & V. Z. Roberts (Eds.), *The unconscious at work. Individual and organisational stress in the human services*. London: Routledge.
- Hinshelwood, R. D. (1994). *Clinical Klein*. London: Free Association Books.
- Hinshelwood, R. D. (2009). Do unconscious processes affect educational institutions? *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 14(4), 509–522.
- Hirschhorn, L. (1988). *The workplace within: Psychodynamics of organizational life*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hoyle, L. (2004). *From sycophant to saboteur. In Working below the surface: The emotional life of contemporary organizations*. London: Karnac Books.
- Jaques, E. (1953). On the dynamics of the social structure. A contribution to the psychoanalytical study of social phenomena. *Human Relations*, 6(1), 3–24.
- Klein, M. (1935). A contribution to the psychogenesis of manic depressive states. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 16, 145–174. Reprinted in: Klein, M. *Love, guilt and reparation and other works, 1921–1945* (pp. 262–289). London: Hogarth Press, 1975.

- Klein, M. (1946). Notes on some schizoid mechanisms. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 27(3–4), 99–110. Reprinted in: Klein, M. *Envy and gratitude and other works, 1946–1963*. London: Hogarth Press, 1987.
- Lewin, K. (1947). Frontiers in group dynamics. *Human Relations*, 1(1), 5–41.
- Lewin, K., Lippitt, R., & White, R. K. (1939). Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created social climates. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 10, 271–299.
- Litwin, G. H., & Stringer, A. (1966). *Motivation and organisational climate*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lucey, A. (2015). Corporate cultures and inner conflicts. In D. Armstrong & M. Rustin (Eds.), *Social defences against anxiety: Explorations in a paradigm*. London: Karnac Books.
- Marrow, A. (1969). *The practical theorist: The life and work of Kurt Lewin*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- McLeod, S. A. (2009). Defense mechanisms. Retrieved from <http://www.simplypsychology.org/defense-mechanisms.html>
- Menzies, I. E. P. (1960). A case study in the functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety. A report on a study of the nursing service of a general hospital. *Human Relations*, 13, 95–121. Reprinted in: *Containing anxiety in institutions. Selected essays. Volume 1*. London: Free Association Books, 1988. Also in abridged form in: Trist, E., & Murray, H. (Eds.), *The social engagement of social science. Volume 1*. London: Free Association Books, 1990.
- Menzies, I. E. P. (1979). Staff support systems: Task and anti-task in adolescent institutions. In R. D. Hinshelwood & N. P. Manning (Eds.), *Therapeutic communities. Reflections and progress* (pp. 197–207). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Reprinted in: Menzies, I. E. P. *Containing anxiety in institutions. Selected essays. Volume 1*. London: Free Association Books, 1988.
- Miller, E. J. (1990). Experiential learning in groups: The development of the Leicester Model. In E. Trist & H. Murray (Eds.), *The social engagement of social science. A Tavistock anthology. Volume 1. The socio-psychological perspective* (pp. 165–185). London: Free Association Books.
- Miller, E. J., & Gwynne, G. V. (1979). *A life apart*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Montgomery, A., & Kehoe, I. (2010). Reimagining our school system. *The Psychologist*, 23(6), 486–487.
- Moustaki-Smilansky, E. (1994). Glossary. In S. Box (Ed.), *Crisis at adolescence: Object relations therapy with the family*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Neumann, J. E. (1999). Systems psychodynamics in the service of political organisational change. In R. French & R. Vince (Eds.), *Group relations, management and organisation* (pp. 54–69). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Obholzer, A. (1994). Authority, power and leadership: Contributions from group relations training. In A. Obholzer & V. Z. Roberts (Eds.), *The unconscious at work. Individual and organisational stress in the human services*. London: Routledge.
- Ogbonna, E., & Harris, L. C. (2000). Leadership style, organizational culture and performance: Empirical evidence from UK companies. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 11(4), 766–788.
- Ogden, T. H. (1982). *Projective identification and psychotherapeutic technique*. New York, NY: Jason Aronson Publishing.
- Pellegrini, D. (2010). Splitting and projection: Drawing on psychodynamics in educational psychology practice. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 26(3), 251–260.
- Phillips, S., Sen, D., & McNamee, R. (2007). Prevalence and causes of self-reported work-related stress in head teachers. *Occupational Medicine*, 57, 367–376.
- Reed, B., & Armstrong, D. (1988). *Professional management*. London: The Grubb Institute.
- Rice, A. K. (1953). Productivity and social organization in an Indian weaving shed: An examination of some aspects of the socio-technical system of an experimental automatic loom shed. *Human Relations*, 6, 297–329.
- Rice, A. K. (1965). *Learning for leadership: Interpersonal and intergroup relations*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Roberts, V. Z. (1994). The organization of work: Contributions from open-systems theory. In A. Obholzer & V. Z. Roberts (Eds.), *The unconscious at work. Individual and organisational stress in the human services*. London: Routledge.
- Schein, E. G. (1987). *Process consultation volume II: Lessons for managers and consultants*. Cambridge, MA: Addison Wesley.



- Schein, E. G. (1990). A general philosophy of helping: Process consultation. *Sloan Management Review*, 32(3), 57–64.
- Segal, H. (1988). *Introduction to the work of Melanie Klein*. London: Karnac Books.
- Solms, M. (2015). *The feeling brain: Selected papers on neuropsychanalysis*. London: Karnac Books.
- Stapley, L. F. (2006). *Individuals, groups and organizations: Beneath the surface*. London: Karnac Books.
- Stokes, J. (2015). Defences against anxiety in the law. In D. Armstrong & M. Rustin (Eds.), *Social defences against anxiety: Explorations in a paradigm*. London: Karnac Books.
- Sutoris, M. (2000). Understanding schools as systems: Implications for the management of pupil behaviour. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 17(1), 51–62.
- Symington, J., & Symington, N. (1996). *The clinical thinking of Wilfred Bion*. Hove: Routledge.
- Thorlindsson, T. (1987). *The skipper effect in the Icelandic herring industry*. Reykjavic: University of Iceland.
- Trist, E., & Bamforth, K. (1951). Some social and psychological consequences of the longwall method of coal getting. *Human Relations*, 4, 3–38.
- Tsai, Y. (2011). Relationship between organisational culture, leadership behaviour and job satisfaction. *BMC Health Services Research*, 11(98), doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/1472-6963-11-98>.
- Tucker, S. (2010). An investigation of the stresses, pressures and challenges faced by primary head teachers in a context of organisational change in schools. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 24(1), 63–74.
- Tucker, S. (2015). Still not good enough! Must try harder: An exploration of social defences in schools. In D. Armstrong & M. Rustin (Eds.), *Social defences against anxiety: Explorations in a paradigm*. London: Karnac Books.
- Vaillant, G. E., & Vaillant, C. O. (1986). An empirically validated hierarchy of defence mechanisms. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 73, 786–794.
- Vaughan, R. (2010). Academies Bill paves the way for greater freedoms. *Times Educational Supplement*, [online]. Retrieved from <https://www.tes.com/article.aspx?storycode=6045171>
- von Bertalanffy, L. (1969). *General System theory*. New York, NY: George Braziller.
- Waddell, M. (1998). *Inside lives*. London: Karnac Books.
- Woods, K. A., Farrell, P. T., Lewis, S., Rooney, S., Squires, G., & O'Connor, M. (2006). *Review of the function and contribution of educational psychologists in the light of the 'every child matters: change for children' agenda: Research report 792*. London: HMSO.
- Young, R. (2005). Bion and experiences in groups. Retrieved from <http://human-nature.com/rmyoung/papers/pap148h.html>

Copyright of Educational Psychology in Practice is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.