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On the use of discourse analysis in the therapeutic practice of deconstructing and reconstructing the narratives of people suffering from stress and personal breakdowns

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Abstract:

In this paper we will first take a look at some of the interest the concept of stress have received in the context of organizational discourse studies and argue that all though this interest have fertilized a range of interesting discussions of stress as well as modern forms of organization, important tasks still remains. One such task is to inform and qualify the therapeutic practice with people suffering from stress and personal breakdowns related to work. Secondly we will present our own embryonic attempts of integrating insights and tools from discourse analysis in our therapeutic practice. Finally we will discuss some of the possible relationships between discourse, power, matter and body as these manifests themselves in the stories of clients and discuss the possible implications of these findings.

1. Introduction

As a phenomenon stress has been the subject of considerable research interest. This is an interest that historically can be traced back to the 19th century, but which has escalated and intensified in the period after The Second World War and during the past 35 years. In the last approximately 20 years not only occupational physicians and occupational psychologists have exerted this interest, but other researchers have too. Among these are researchers in the human and social sciences who have an interest in the status of stress theories as discursive constructions and the roots and possible consequences of these constructions. This interest in stress and the concept of stress as a discursive construction has covered a wide field: from neutral explorations of how laymen; popular media or selected groups of interested parties understand stress (e.g. Furnham, 1997; Dewe & Driscoll, 2002; Kinman & Jones, 2005; Harkness, Long, Bermbach, Patterson, Jordan & Kahn, 2005; Borchmann and Pedersen, 2006) to attempts at an actual deconstruction or critique of prevailing conceptions of stress (e.g. Young, 1980; Newton, 1995; Brown, 1996;

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Wainright & Calnan, 2002). Among other researchers with an interest in discourses, phenomena like stress and personal breakdowns have been regarded, however, as something fairly distinct and something which in a critique of contemporary society can be identified as one of the unhappy outcomes of how neo-liberal thought has colonized a range of other discourses concerning the appropriate arrangement and organization of workplaces and the consequently legitimized forms of practice (e.g. Praetorius, 2004; Ogbonna & Harris, 2004; Chandler, Berry & Clark, 2002). Inspired by both of the aforementioned interests, respectively the interest in stress as a discursive construction; and the interest in stress as a deeply problematic phenomenon for individuals and organizations as well as society, we set out to show how we in our therapeutic work try to use insight and tools from discourse analysis to try to map patterns as well as schisms in our clients’ speech and thinking and connect these patterns with the circumstances which have produced the breakdown as well as the clients’ thinking about the breakdown. As such, the article attempts to show how insights and tools from discourse analysis can inform and qualify the therapeutic practice with people suffering from stress and personal breakdowns. Furthermore the article also attempt to yield a contribution to the discussion of stress and the discussion of the various ontologies we can employ in our attempts to make sense of or reach a greater clarity about why people talk and think in ways which are – or are just estimated to be – inexpedient for themselves in the context of stress.

2. Stress theories and perspectives on the possible causes to the dominant understanding of stress

Today most researchers would agree on defining stress in terms of a stimulus response relationship, but the more detailed theorizing of stress is marked by a series of discursive struggles. Risking a gross oversimplification one could claim that within the context of occupational stress one central battle is between; 1) those who theorize stress as an inevitable outcome of a substantial imbalance between demands and available resources used to deal with these demands, where the demands are primarily theorized as being imposed from the outside and where resources is primarily theorized as factors outside the individual, e.g. degree of job discretion, level of support, etc. and a few factors located in the individual: e.g. level of knowledge and skills specifically related to a given task, *and* 2) those for whom the individual’s personality, dispositions and ways of interpreting and handling the many potential events, which alone or together have the potential of being regarded as demands and thus causes of stress, are given a central role in the theorizing. If we

were to label these two positions the second view could rightfully be labelled the structural-related understanding and theorizing of stress, whereas the first might be called an individual-related understanding and theorizing of stress².

Presumably both ways of theorizing stress have their cases laid out for them: no doubt you can identify conditions – or design working situations - in which we would all be stressed and invariably break down, and no doubt you can identify or design working situations in which individuals (who possess what we would perceive to be the same specifically job related skills) will differ in their ability to endure and/or cope with the situation, thus indicating the existence of a continuum of stress-fit and coping-able individuals and not so stress-fit and coping-able individuals. However, questions such as: to what might this perceived difference owe its existence, how important is it, is it a constant or a situational determined something, and whether it is something acquirable, etc. etc., still remain open to discussion.

Whereas these questions in themselves call for a vivid discussion one could argue that the struggle is fuelled with more than purely academic disagreements on the adequacy or plausibility of specific conceptions and theses. By making the focus or non focus on the individuals’ interpretation and coping repertoire the central point of struggle, we are reminded of other discussions on the causes of failure and success, in which we either allow differences in personality an explanatory role - or contest such explanations by trying to locate our explanations in something outside the individual or in a prior external conditioning of the individual - and thus of the ideological component of the discourse. Likewise, we are also reminded that resources have to be allocated differently depending on our judgement of which actions are rational to engage in – that is, effective and fair - in order to reduce or prevent stress and thus of the potential economic and political consequences of the discourse.

By engaging in such reflections we engage in a meta-theorizing with regard to the causes and/or reasons and effects of the conceptualization and theorizing of stress. However, this meta-theorizing can also depart from other worries. Recently, researchers have argued that stress has succeeded in becoming the most popular discussion frame for the discussion of workplace dissent or distress as such. This, however, has not been without certain costs. For some the price is that the concept has become too wide. A characteristic which might be attractive to researchers eager to

² The first view can be linked to names like Lazarus (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The term designating the contrasting view can in a Scandinavian context be linked to names as Gardell (1976) and Theorell and Karasek. (Theorell and Karasek, 1992)

pursue their own idiosyncratic or political agendas and among layman for its “great” explanatory value - but not for research with a capital R. Hence, there are calls for critical evaluations of the stress research and for a replacement of general stress research with a variety of subject specific theories and studies (Jones and Bright, 2001; Briner, Harris & Daniels, 2004) Others have complained that the existing stress discourse is too narrow since it has not succeeded in bringing about discussions of workplace arrangements or a political empowering of the stressed (e.g. Newton, 1995). A diagnosis or complaint, which partly hinges on a critique of the dominance of the individual-related understanding and theorizing of stress, which has functioned as a device for constructing a narrow individualist discourse on working life, where it is the employee’s own responsibility to cope with the demand of the workplace, and partly on a critique of the inability of the structure-related understanding and theorizing of stress to successfully embed its understanding and theorizing in other discourses on power and politics.

However, the discussion and theorizing of stress is not confined to the research community but also takes place in popular media and among laymen. Academic works that centre on exploring stress conceptions and theorizing of stress as they occur within these domains are also becoming more common. Some works explore conceptions of stress in the popular media (e.g. Lewig and Dollard, 2001 and to some extent Newton, 1995) and report that the dominant view of stress here is somewhat ambiguous or contradictory. Firstly, stress is primarily considered to be a negative outcome of unfavourable workplace conditions, but is also perceived as constructive and positive in minor doses. The combination of the view of stress as a negative outcome of unfavourable workplace conditions and stress as something that, in minor doses, is positive – a view, which draws its legitimacy³ from the theoretical concept *eustress*³ – creates an ambiguity, since it to some extent makes it difficult to isolate conditions which unanimously can be classified as unfavourable, thus reintroducing the individual and his/her aptness in the centre of attention again. Secondly, techniques of stress management are almost unanimously prescribed as the best way of trying to avoid a stress overdose in spite of its perceived “injection” from unfavourable working conditions: a contradiction, which might be caused by anything from faulty inferences over unspoken cynicism and “how-to-do-it-yourself-genre-preferences” to tacit resignation.

Analysis reflecting on the reasons and causes to prevailing theories of stress and layman understandings all have an ontology which explains why people theorizes or thinks – or are inclined

³ The term “eustress” was originally coined by Hans Seyle (Seyle, 1974)

to theorize and think – the way they do. Be it explicit or implicit. This ontology can model the speakers in many ways; as reflective and strategic actors, as semi-conscious beings who mirrors them selves in some parts of the stress discourse and not in other parts depending on their present circumstances or as passive recipients of ideology. Or to paraphrase: we can stipulate reasons as well as causes or motives, when we adress the grand question of why people thinks and speaks and acts the way they do. A question which in many respect is radicalized when you are confronted with people suffering from personal break-downs in the therapeutice practice.

3. Context and Method.

The case that we will employ as the empirical launch pad for the article comes from our own practice of treating people suffering from stress. This practice is carried out within the framework of an occupational medicine clinic and the newly formed stress clinic at Aalborg University. In this work, we are confronted with stressed and actually broken-down people and the therapeutic practice is founded on setting these people on their feet again or identifying the variables in the surroundings which must be changed in order for these people to return to work⁴. As a practicing occupational psychologist you meet the clients’ own descriptions of their symptoms and frames of mind as well as their own attempts at explaining how their conditions have appeared. However, you seldom meet a client who immediately has an adequate explanation or understanding of his or her own condition which for the present is sufficient in giving the client a gratifying degree of psychological well-being. The reason for this is, among other things, that a reflection over his or her own limitations, such as these can manifest themselves physically and psychologically, suddenly has been forced upon the client. Consequently, the client tends towards having an ego-related focus that is not adequate for an understanding of the causes of their stress. Therefore an important part of the actual therapeutic work consists in sorting out the previous sequence of events and establishing a greater degree of psychological well-being through rendering the client’s own condition comprehensible. The client can be the carrier of important insights into herself or himself, but also repressed experiences. This is because breakdowns are often the result of prolonged stress

⁴ The outcome of the treatment practice can, for example, also concern re-location or questions pertaining to compensation

actions stemming from opaque or even illegitimate processes in which experiences have been hindered, ignored or disregarded. Accordingly, a substantial piece of work consists in collaborating with the clients in order to deconstruct and re-construct the clients’ understanding of the events they have been part of. Among other things this occurs through the elucidation and analysis of the discourses and narratives which clients use and make⁵.

In the therapeutic-analytical work of subjecting speech and thinking to an examination of patterns and schisms, we work from an observance that is best described as critical realistic. That is, we work on a certainty of the socially constructed character of a range of phenomena, but also on the assumption of the reality and significance of entities and structures. We are faced with stressed and broken-down people whose bodies and minds have been confronted with concrete events in work organizations and the many demands embedded in these, as well as power asymmetries and limitations to legitimate and illegitimate speech. These are factors and norms that determine and influence the clients’ attempts at understanding or forming meaning. Attempts which create different degrees of well-being or frustrate; place responsibility and open and close windows of actions. Every client can be said to be different and have his or her own narrative, but, to be sure, there are also many similarities and shared characteristics that indicate that these narratives are not created in a vacuum.

Let us start out by making it clear that working with people suffering from stress obviously demands an amount of knowledge about possible stress factors and strains as well as reactions to strain and stress symptoms. However, this knowledge is not enough. This is not only due to the fact that this knowledge, like so many other bodies of knowledge, is incomplete, but more specifically because the client in front of you cannot be regarded as a more or less qualified informant who can be used to establish a professional psychological strain anamnesis. The client is not to be regarded as simply an informant: he or she is in the process of re-establishing herself/himself and this influences the speech you are presented to. Or to formulate it somewhat differently: when the client attends a session with the psychologist, he or she has already been in the process of forming meaning and possibly re-constructing identity, seeing that the client has been

⁵ The understandings and attempts at forming meaning that we are presented to can be many-sided. Often they are already infected by the formation of theory, and in some cases also from visits to non-occupational psychologists who have sought to identify conditions as being ingrained in the client’s individual biography or character traits. The client’s natural susceptibility to this approach is, among other things, caused by the fact that the client, in the capacity of his or her breakdown at some point is looking backwards.

brought into another condition than the one he or she previously was in. Consequently, when the person suffering from stress or breakdown begins his or her speech, multiple voices are often heard and it is in this confusion of voices, or the combination of a fixed voice and several smaller voices, that the therapeutic process starts. This is a process that we in the present context will treat as a work of analysis rather than a work of conversation unfolded together with the client.

As the starting point for our part of the attempts of understanding, we depart from a number of points of reference that briefly will be presented in the following. These points of reference derive from our clients presenting us to narratives and accounts that partly can have numerous different *characteristics*; and partly they can be assumed to have a range of psychological and social *functions* with matching “drivers”, i.e. possible determining or initiating causes.

A fundamental way of apprehending a client’s condition of breakdown is as a self-concept that has come to doubt itself, because the self cannot meet its own understanding of itself anymore, and the ethical and moral claims which are often attached to this. This is a phenomenon that is accentuated by the fact that breakdowns frequently can be traced back to attacks on the client’s identity in which he or she has been subjected to the play of hidden powers both within and outside himself or herself. This also means that the direction of a client’s attempt at forming meaning is characterized by being an attempt at regaining himself or herself through the establishment of a legitimate narrative of self-management, as well as the re-establishment of confidence in his or her own judgement. This is a judgement that is experienced as debilitated after the experience of the failure and flux of body and mind. However, this process does not happen freely and without influences. The body interferes in relation to the attempt at forming meaning and the attempt at self-management is controlled by the legitimacy that does or does not attach itself to certain discourses and themes. These different influences manifest themselves in a number of different characteristics in clients’ speech, which for example can be both clear and unclear; coherent or incoherent; either embedded in experience or not. Similarly, clients’ attempts at explanation can be linear or disconnected; limited to a focus on interactions in local systems or be linked to global systems. These are all important clues in the ongoing therapeutic process, among other things because such characteristics reveal what has and has not been transparent for the client just as clues to what has been legitimate and illegitimate to talk about are given.

3. *Case*

The client in the present case is a social education worker who suffers from occupational stress. She is on sick leave from her work in an elementary school remedial class. Her symptoms are disruptive sleep, involuntary weeping, decreased memory, concentration and self-esteem, inner restlessness and a feeling of being trapped. After her sick leave, she returns to her job which she shortly after decides to give up. Her general practitioner refers her to treatment in an occupational medicine clinic, where she receives four therapy sessions. After the course of treatment she resumes work in another institution.

3.1. *The Client's narrative(s)*

In the first session the client tells that she has lost interest in – and finds it overwhelming to be confronted with – the children, which is the main element in the pedagogical work. She has difficulties anticipating the children's outgoing behavior and perceives herself as 'burnt-out' and the general quality of her work as reduced. Attempting to explain the cause of her condition, she mentions a huge turnover of pupils during the current year. This condition had burdened her, as it among other things has led to a problematic collaboration with a caseworker in the municipality. In this context she has felt let down by management, because she did not receive organizational support in the form of supervision. She also mentions the relocation of a colleague, a teacher, to the remedial class. The reason given by management for the relocation to the client's class was that the teaching needed the professional expertise of a teacher in case of an external evaluation of the pupils' academic standards. For the client this had led to conflicts and had been the source of disagreements between the two. Nevertheless she does not refer to these conflicts as the source of her stress condition.

If considering the client solely as a more or less qualified informant concerning the causes to her breakdown, one is presented to a line of traditional stressors for example new assignments, lack of support and even a use of the clinical expression 'burnt – out'. But when considering the client as organizationally embedded, event-influenced, but also as an active and reflective constructor of meaning, one will find differing trails of narration in her descriptions of the causes to her reduced well-being and breakdown. Even at a first glance these trails do not constitute an integrated and

coherent unity. One narrative identifies the causes as organizationally embedded, qua the extraordinary pressure from conflict-ridden interactions with pupils and external collaborators combined with a lack of managerial support. Another narrative identifies the adding of extra professional resources through the entrance of a new colleague, although this has also led to conflicts.

When looking at the characteristics of the two narratives, the first narrative constitutes a coherent and consistent explanation for the client's breakdown, whereas the second narrative seems more fragmented, filled with contrasts and inconsistent. A simple example hereof would be the description of the colleague as both a resource and a strain on the client.⁶ The most coherent and explicit narrative proves to be the least important one and is not central in the therapeutic process. The other and more incoherent narrative about the experiences with her new colleague however does.

The client tells that the disputes between the two have revolved around the priority of a pedagogical and an academic approach respectively. In this dispute the client perceived the colleague as commanding and domineering. She also felt that the colleague's work was considered more significant than her work, even though a division of the pedagogical tasks often implied that the colleague only read with one of the pupils and that she had responsibility for the rest of the class. Furthermore the colleague had a tendency to assign to herself the least outgoing pupils and left the most tiring ones to the client. During the daily work the client and her colleague rarely spoke together. When they did, it was because the colleague called the client outside normal working hours. During these conversations the colleague continuously pointed out her own efforts and asked for affirmation. Even after the client had reported sick the colleague continued to call and talk about the difficulties she experienced now being on her own in the class, which made the client feel guilty for being sick.

At some point the client gradually begins – albeit rudimentary and fragmentary – to identify the colleague as a serious strain and informed the management that the colleague was the causing of her problems, but at the same time she had asked them not to do anything about it, because she

⁶ Inconsistencies often appear because the organizational reality, its structures and participants, and its management of interests are complex and non-transparent. (See Thompson & Smith 2010, p. 54)

feared the colleague’s reaction. Despite her beginning realization of the cause to her breakdown the client maintains a description of the colleague as being good at her job, even though this conflicts with her descriptions of the colleague as for example being disliked by the pupils. In the organizational context the client describes the colleague as consciously staging herself, but adds that the fact that she had been observing and focusing on her colleague in this manner had made her fear that she was becoming paranoid and hypersensitive.

The last part of the therapy, which succeeds in setting the client on her feet again: that is securing her psychological well-being and her reentrance on a workplace, concerns itself primarily with the exploration of her interactions with her new colleague. These interactions were according to the judgement of the therapist in charge hugely influenced by the newcomer’s intense attempts to defend against her own work-related burdens and identity strains, but also impervious to the client while she took part in them. In fact the case appears to be an example of how one burned-out individual’s actions and attempts to defend herself against additional strains leads to the break down and near burn-out of another otherwise healthy person.

3.2. The Narratives’ Characteristics

When considering the client’s attempts to explain the chain of events she has been through, including the earlier identified differing narratives, it is possible to apply a variety of different analytical foci. Here we will shortly direct our attention to three characteristics in the client’s explanatory attempts and their related narratives, namely 1) the chronological organization of events in the client’s explanations and the relation of this chronology to the actual chain of events, 2) the inconsistency in the presented narratives and portrayal of persons, and finally 3) the description, as well as and the client’s perception of the social order and it’s in-built processes in the two narratives respectively. Taken together the characteristics all point in the direction of the second narrative as being central and furthermore bring important clues to an identification of what has been legitimate and illegitimate discourse in the organisation and what has been transparent and opaque to the client.

When regarding the actual chain of events, we find three chronologically placed events, namely 1) the meeting with a new colleague (who officially is described as a resource, but is

perceived as a person who causes an attack on the client’s dignity), 2) problems with pupils and municipality caseworkers and corresponding withdrawals from these interactions and lastly 3) a break down due to prolonged exhaustion⁷. In the client’s explanatory attempt (the first narrative) the temporally nearest factors, being the pupils and caseworkers, are presented as primary causes to the break down, while the first event, which is the entrance of and meeting with the colleague, is only mentioned peripherally. From one angle this can be regarded normal, since the acute bodily manifestations of a break down often make a disrupted individual search for events which are close in terms of time, when wishing to identify the causes to a break down. From another angle however it is unusual that clients ignore events, since they - when the events have been going on long enough - tend to forget what has just happened at the expense of produced explanations, where everything appears predestined in the past. Therefore the question here is how this ranking of events should be interpreted and whether it indicates the existence of a taboo. Something which has lost its status as a possible variable in the explanation, because it could not be contained within or was in opposition to organizational and collective understandings. At least such a suspicion is confirmed when focusing on the perceptions articulated in the client’s second narrative and on the contradictions that characterize her portrayal of the colleague.

Thus in the second narrative we find a distinctly tense and contradictory relation between the client’s interpretations, experiences and perceptions which for example stands out in the descriptions of the colleague in a variety of different roles and positions. Roles and positions of which some are confirmed and others are negated or stand in sharp contrast to the status and position formally assigned to the colleague in the organization. Examples hereof are descriptions of the colleague as both 1) professionally competent, but not empathic and as having poor relationships with the pupils and 2) as commanding and domineering and as fragile.

A third characteristic worth noticing is that the social systems which the client describes herself as embedded in are populated differently in the two narratives and that the social order and its changes are described differently and with varying degrees of insight. In the first narrative the primary participants are the new and the older pupils, their parents, external collaborators and management. In the second narrative the primary participant is the colleague, while other

⁷ Bringing matters to a head the chronology is not irrelevant, as it indicates two options. Either one’s abilities have been eroded due to attacks against one’s position, or one’s position has been eroded due to attrition of one’s abilities.

colleagues, management, the pupils and their parents merely figure as subsidiary participants. Also the client's eye on the social order and its processes seems different in the two narratives. In the first narrative the work-related problem is described as embedded in an organizational structure, while the immediate interactions with the colleague in the second narrative are described as detached from an organizational structure i.e. focus is here limited to the primary interactions between the client and the colleague without connecting these to the wider organizational structures in which they are entrenched. In other words the client is in her production of the second narrative without knowledge of the fact that the interactions on this level can be determined by the administration of participants taking place on an organizational and collective level. Furthermore she demonstrates blindness to the secondary participants and the possible motives and processes behind the initiation of a change in her field ⁸.

3.3 The function and origins of the narratives

The central question as to why the client makes a hierarchical classification of the narratives can be addressed by reflecting on the first narrative's active function and its status as a function of both external and internal forces.

If the first narrative is seen as having an active function then it is, as mentioned, to create meaning. This is a meaning, however, which is not exclusively neutrally comprehension-oriented. It can also be seen as aimed at re-conquering the client's own mind and at coping with the conflict-ridden situation the client is embedded in. Consequently, the client in the first narrative explains to herself and others what her condition is and why she has broken down and burned out and she does this without having to include the conflict with the colleague and thereby break with the official organizational understanding of the conflict. If the first narrative is seen as having this function, it is possible in principle to stipulate two different perceptions of her status as a conscious agent who is able to act. In spite of their difference these two perceptions can both serve to thematize the fact that her attempts at forming meaning and explanation are influenced by official discourses and subsequent normative pressure. These are respectively 1) a perception of the client

⁸ The consequence of this blindness is that the client becomes more absorbed in the explanations and legitimations of the secondary participants and hence has difficulties questioning the legitimacy of the initiated changes.

as a passive victim of the established discourses whose ability to articulate experiences is regulated by the limitations of what counts and what does not count as legitimate explanations and 2) a more nuanced perception of the client as an agent who tries to manage herself strategically within the framework of the spaces of opportunity that are laid down by a range of official discourses. These are both the discourses relating to stress and burn out and the framework of what can and what cannot be addressed in connection with the colleague’s re-location. However, both ontologies are too simple. Despite the fact that they manage to include power asymmetries and the matching normative pressures’ influence on what can be thought or said, both ontologies and the interpretational perspectives belonging to them lack an inclusion of and reflections on a number of important circumstances. These include among others the nourishment of her interpretations that her sensation of her own body gives off⁹, but also – and more importantly – how the semi-conscious self-protection strategies that she activates in order to cope with the work-related strains that she is exposed to affect the course of the events. In the process, the client has consequently experienced that she withdrew herself from the colleague who she found transgressed and invaded her boundaries. Her self-protection strategy when faced with the colleague’s invasion of her work life is expressed through a withdrawal from her job instead of the colleague. In this case an essential problem is that this simultaneously involves a distancing from the pupils and their parents who also were central sources in anchoring her work-related identity. The distancing also means that she eventually breaks her own norms and moral code and has feelings of shame and guilt, because she experiences that she does less than she ought to. Psychologically, the client’s self-protection strategy, in other words, seems to lead to her experiencing and understanding herself as being burned out and it may be one of the reasons why she at the start of the sessions doubts if she can actually manage a job as a social education worker.

A contributing factor to her difficulty in understanding the colleague’s invasion is also the organizational discourses in relation to the colleague and the reason for the colleague’s re-location. It emerges from the client’s account and narrative that her colleague has been put on a pedestal with a reference to her professionalism. With this, the colleague is placed in a position of strength and is offered the opportunity to dominate in spite of her status as a weak and vulnerable

⁹ The burned out body’s contribution to establishing a focus on recent as well as ego-centered events have been mentioned previously. As Smail has argued, we do not have a clear insight into the circumstances that have prompted our breakdown, but we always feel our body and physical and psychological impairment when we have been stressed for a long period of time. Therefore it is natural to think that the events come from within (Smail, 2007).

person who in different ways tries to take control in order to demarcate herself from the job that she cannot contain and manage any longer¹⁰. For example, the colleague constantly talks about herself so it sounds like she makes a great contribution. This staging means that she manages to appear as the opposite of what she is to the client and combined with her emotional discharge she has been able to thoroughly tyrannize the client. She dominates the client and at the same time appeals to the client’s solicitude and therefore she appears as a double figure to the client: the powerful and the vulnerable figure. This doubleness can be difficult to cope with or it can be difficult to contain anger towards a vulnerable tyrant, particularly when you have not entirely seen through which manipulations are used and which self-protection strategies you are faced with in another person. This is most likely the background for the inability to take action that she also experiences.

The fact that the client towards the end of the sessions chose to give up her job can therefore also be seen as a strategy of evading the conflicts she was faced with and the sense of powerlessness she experienced. This is a strategy of evasion that could subsequently be legitimized by her first narrative about herself as being burned out. This “choice” can in many ways be regarded as an elegant decision, because while she has chosen to give up her job, she can simultaneously maintain that if she had been able to cope with her job she would have continued working. In other words, her motives and morals remain irreproachable, but the fact that she has given up her job is linked with considerable ambivalence and self-reproach. This is an ambivalence which revolves around the fact that the client’s narrative of her own breakdown and the reasons for it still contain a negative evaluation of her own morals in the sense of a let-down in relation to the pupils and their parents. The problem is also that it at the same time becomes increasingly difficult to see herself in a new job. Thus, the deconstruction and reconstruction of the client’s narrative bear marks that large parts of her experiences have not found legitimacy within the organizational discourse about the rationale for the re-location of the teacher to the domain of the client that has been carried out. The deconstruction and reconstruction also show that the client is captured by the discursive constructions that glossed over this change which is why she cannot transform her sensations of stressors to action. This fact along with her own strategies of withdrawal result in her being confronted with inextricable conflicts, dilemmas and ambiguous situations which she cannot

¹⁰ In that way, the evaluation is that the colleague cannot manage being a teacher and the children in troop any longer. Therefore she has turned to the special needs classes, but on the false assumptions that she will be able to cope with this kind of work because there are fewer pupils in the classes. The problem is that working in the special needs classes may require exactly what the colleague no longer can manage.

escape from until the first narrative. These are circumstances that emphasize a fundamental point which is that the repertoires of interpretation that humans employ in their active management of themselves in the work-related and organizational realities that they are embedded in are given both externally from a power relation and internally from systems of self-protection.

4. Discussion; possible implications

Despite its status as a single case study, the case, to our minds, presents an occasion to emphasize a number of lessons. These are lessons that partly relate to stress theories and partly relate to therapeutic practice and in the present forum discourse theorists.

A main point in relation to stress researchers is that the stress process and its result can neither be understood in isolation from the organizational and social processes and structures that the individual is embedded in nor independently from the repertoires of interpretation that in this context are at the individual's disposal. In the client's understanding of her own condition and the causes of it, it is possible to identify a number of diagnoses and stressor identifications that originate in official discourses and/or theorizations of stress, burn out and the reasons for these conditions. The diagnoses and stressor identifications in the present case are not only insufficient in determining the client's condition and the course of events that led to the condition; furthermore they can be said to have an active function in the escalation of the client's condition. First, the insufficiency of the diagnoses and stressor identifications originates in the blindness in relation to organizational and social processes, in this context particularly the attempts at management of power and activated organizational and person-related self-protection strategies, which is shown by a stressor identification that has a narrow focus on isolated examples of occupational strain and/or combinations of these and likewise narrow and unambiguously affirmatively valorized control resources. This is a blindness which, in this way, is transferred to the client in her ongoing and final self-diagnosis. Second, in terms of these discursive constructions' contribution to an escalation of the client's breakdown these originate in the client's ongoing self-diagnosis and the actions and lack of action that are derived from the self-diagnosis. As a consequence of a wrong diagnosis, the client chooses to withdraw from some of the vitalizing domains and role positions in her work that generate surplus energy. This partly results in less charging of her occupational pride and well-

being, and partly activates new conflicts and dilemmas with ensuing pangs of conscience. Regarded as a whole, it seems that the official stress discourses with their blindness and organizationally mediated tabooing of the thematization of power management processes and self-protection strategies can be said to mediate the transfer of one person’s breakdown to another person. In this case it is the transfer of the colleague’s breakdown to the client herself: The colleague’s experience of strain in her previous job is addressed by herself as the wish for fewer pupils and new challenges. The school administration construes this as a need for an upgrade of her professional skills which in turn causes strain on the client, ultimately resulting in her breakdown. This is a process that is not stopped by – or indeed seems to have the potential to be stopped by - the activated stress discourses. Thus, a point in the case has been that the initiated change and its legitimatization resulted in drastic changes for the client both in relation to her self-perception and the imperative obligations she was faced with in her daily life. This is because the primary interaction and collaboration between her and her colleague was not about a joint management of a “class” and a strengthening of professional skills which was how it was construed in the official explanations. Rather, it was about being confronted with a worn-down person’s self-protection strategies and about being forced to support this person’s defence of her identity. This wretched state of affairs was made possible by the collective illusions that legitimatized and argued for the changes.

A number of lessons can also be derived for the future treatment of clients. First and foremost, the necessity of devoting time to clients’ interpretational repertoires in which clients are not exclusively seen as informants, but as organizationally embedded, event-affected and active and reflexive constructors of meaning who can be victims of opaque processes. A key element here seems to be to take the client’s experiences seriously and observe how these respectively open and close themselves in competing tracks of narratives.

Finally, if we regard the possible implications for discourse theorists you could claim polemically that the meta–controversy about the relationship between structure and agent suffers from the same defect as the stress theories’ contrasts between structure and subject and their narrow attempts at combining these without a critical social psychology: What is needed is the will to consider an organizationally embedded subject that is subject to both power, body and materiality and apply it to the discussion on the subject and its status as an agent.

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