

Organisational & Social Dynamics 4(1): 22–45 (2004)

Moral Violence in Organizations: Hierarchic Dominance and the Absence of Potential Space

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Abstract

The authors introduce the concept of *moral violence* in organizations, by which they refer to emotionally and psychologically abusive and harmful workplace cultures. These narcissistic, organizational cultures, are, hierarchically, governed by arbitrary use of power and authority, sadistic-masochistic, relational patterns of dominance and submission, and an absence of potential space for dialogue and play. Providing several vignettes, the authors illustrate the prevalence of moral violence in managerial practices that result in dehumanizing and demoralizing the workforce. In so doing, the authors take an object relational and self-psychological, psychoanalytic perspective in understanding and working with morally violent organizations.

Omnipotence describes a defensive wish, buried in every psyche, that one will have a perfect world, will prevail over time, death, and the other – and that coercion can succeed. (Benjamin, 1995)

Human aggression is most dangerous when it is attached to two great absolutarian psychological constellations: the grandiose self and the archaic omnipotent object. (Kohut, 1972, p. 378)

From now on the subject says ‘Hullo object! I destroyed you. I love you. You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you. While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in unconscious *fantasy*’. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 90)

INTRODUCTION

Many people think of violence in the workplace when the media reports another shooting rampage at an industrial plant or post office.

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Images like these, when combined with incidents of assault and harassment, indicate to many that brutality is a part of organizational life. To these forms of brutality may be added acts of downsizing, management by intimidation and, more recently, corporate deception and betrayal of public trust – Enron, Arthur Andersen, ImClone and WorldCom. Given this broad range of suspect and frequently harmful actions, inquiry into the roles of organizational culture and leadership is essential. In this paper, we focus our inquiry on the routine, accepted and even banal qualities of organizational life that harm their members and society. We ask: is the workplace often experienced as ‘morally violent’, by which we mean is it a workplace dominated by a cultural moralism that is emotionally and psychologically deadening, numbing, or brutal?¹ Are certain attributes and assumptions common to these experiences, such as the destruction of reflexivity and learning from experience? Do leaders and followers co-produce the organizational context in which interpersonal and intra-organizational acts of moral violence are tacitly condoned? What role, if any, does hierarchy with its implicit values of dominance and submission, play in fostering and promoting acts of moral violence from within and from without? We analyze these issues by using a perspective informed by psychoanalytic object-relations theory (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983; Ogden, 1989) and to a lesser degree self-psychology (Kohut, 1977, 1984).

We begin by presenting three foundational assumptions that supersede our core argument. First, 21st-century organizations (public, private, and non-profit) are stressful climates. This is particularly the case in America² where stress increases as a consequence of demanding citizens, clients, and customers, Wall Street pressures to ‘make the numbers’, increasing emphasis on public accountability alongside deregulation of services and industry, and public policies aimed at privatizing service delivery. Additionally, organizational change in the form of downsizing and reengineering, actually serve to diminish creativity and resources that otherwise might be available to respond to transforming environments. Draconian, managerial measures do have their consequences, untended or not. In sum, pressures from without and pressures from within, when combined with ill-conceived forms of organizational change in the service of adaptation, are stressful challenges facing today’s workplace. Consequently, the person-organization encounter, in all sectors of the economy, is loaded with stress that precipitates intra- and interpersonal tension and oppression. The American workplace, while offering the promise of self-fulfilment, more often presents a difficult to understand and manage context, filled with marginally controlled events (known in postmodern vernacular as complexity and chaos) that lead to the general experience of stress.

Second, organizations are comprised of individuals in positions of authority with varying degrees of self-esteem and self-cohesion from 'good enough' to deficient and from healthy to excessive narcissism. We find that the presence of moral violence within the workplace is shaped by a combination of hierarchic structures of dominance and submission and narcissistic executives, who are supported by compliant and idealizing subordinates. These leaders compensate for intrapersonal deficiencies and inner emptiness (narcissistic deficits) by striving to occupy positions of inordinate power and authority and by demanding the admiration and loyalty of followers. The fact that individuals with excessive narcissism (and self-deficits) influence organizational cultures and their members, strategies, and decision making, in often destructive and even pathological, ways is well established (Zaleznik and Kets de Vries, 1975; Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984; Schwartz, 1991; Kernberg, 1998; Czander, 1993; Diamond, 1993; Allcorn and Diamond, 1997; Gabriel, 1999; Kets de Vries, 2001).

Third, the combination of an abundance of workplace stress and individuals in senior leadership positions with excessive narcissism, substantially increases the likelihood of psychological regression within these individuals and their organizations (Kernberg, 1998). This regression introduces an array of highly energized and compulsively relied upon psychological defences that, while serving as coping mechanisms for leaders, create destructive and pathological organizational outcomes that emotionally harm participants and diminish their ability to achieve organizational success. These potentially avoidable and hard to resolve operating problems arising from leaders (and tacitly supported by organizational members) may, in turn, further increase the experience of stress and reliance upon defensive routines and destructive enactments. Once again this toxic mix of defensive strategies and destructive outcomes is well established in the literature (Horney, 1950; Levinson, 1957; Zaleznik and Kets de Vries, 1975; Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984; Baum, 1987; Diamond, 1993; Czander, 1993; Allcorn and Diamond, 1997; Gabriel, 1999).

These foundational assumptions lead us to the core argument of the paper: moral violence in organizations is structured around leadership, and the particular character of leader–follower or executive–staff relations. Our focus on leadership, however, should not be viewed as blaming or 'scapegoating' leaders. Rather, we intend to explore leadership as a part of a larger systemic problem comprised of networks and mutual relationships between people with a collective goal. More specifically, we argue that moral violence in organizations is a manifestation of leader–follower psychodynamics, which characteristically involve emotional and cognitive processes of defensive

splitting of self and other into good or bad, all or nothing, black or white, categories. Splitting includes projection and introjection of self and other experience – processes of taking-in and putting-out self and other images. These acts of projection and introjection are at the very heart of emotional attachment to organizations and their leaders and are thereby common psychological processes engaged by members in their desire to affiliate and form identifications with the organizational ideal (Schwartz, 1991). However, in acts of moral violence, as we will discuss at some length, these commonplace psychological processes take a destructive and psychologically deadening path. Thus, we present an admittedly tragic, psychoanalytic perspective of organizations.

We begin by elaborating the concept of moral violence and placing it firmly within organizations and their cultures. Next, we provide case vignettes that further anchor the theoretical discussion within actual organizational experiences from consultations. We then provide an elaboration of the psychodynamic origins of moral violence and its contribution to understanding the violent and destructive qualities of certain 21st-century organizations. We conclude with some reflections of the role of transitional space, time and play, for organizational analysis and consultation.

ORGANIZATIONS AS A CONTEXT FOR STUDYING VIOLENT BEHAVIOUR

We start by defining *moral violence* as abusive, sadistic, and oppressive treatment that results in the emotional trauma, dehumanization, and demoralization of organizational members and, in some cases, of their clients, constituents, and citizenry – what Michael Eigen (1996) calls ‘psychic deadness’ and what the feminist, psychoanalytic writer, Jessica Benjamin (1988) refers to as ‘the problem of domination’. In a study of violence and homicide in the workplace, Diamond (1997) described a ‘toxic mix of oppression and persecution’ rooted in what may be regarded as conventionally accepted, morally justifiable and ethical managerial assumptions and practices.

A case in point is organizational downsizing or right sizing and its companion – organizational redesign and restructuring. These management actions have by now become so universally embraced as to have become standard practices that are understood to be necessary to save the organization from faltering performance, failure, bankruptcy and death. Saving the organization from its excesses and ‘fat’ is not only seen as necessary and justified, but as fulfilling a higher moral and ethical purpose as represented by protecting the jobs of the remaining employees, value for stockholders, and even the larger community that

draws substance from it. These management acts, while introducing a real sense of dread and threat for employees, are also paradoxically understood, if not rationalized, as a 'good'. Much the same is said for attacks upon individual employees, who are bullied, threatened, manipulated, intimidated and publicly humiliated. We might ask: 'what did he or she do to deserve this?' Corporate might respond: 'running a tight ship is important'. 'Discipline must be maintained'. The vignettes that follow provide concrete examples where standard operating procedures and commonly accepted workplace values and norms, the ideology of management and organizational culture, contain a pathological moralism, where a black and white world of good and bad defend the possibility (by providing the rationalization) that organizational violence is for the greater good. The irony with moral violence and its representation in managerial practices might be stated in the phrase: 'destroying the organization to save it'.³

Moral violence, therefore, resides within a context that, despite its destructive properties, seems oddly normal and expected. It may be experienced as part of a daily routine that is unavoidable, and something that must be lived through and tolerated. Within this context, self-integrity is compromised and depersonalization emerges with its accompanying diminishment of passion, creativity, adventure and play. To survive, one conforms, becoming compliant and submissive – a culture that values false self-representation over authenticity.

Harmful and destructive assaults on individual integrity such as these are encountered outside the workplace as well. Instances of 'not good enough' or more overtly abusive parenting of infants and children are psychologically traumatizing and abhorrent. While adults joining the workforce are not children, the workplace is, we suggest, filled with equally abusive and destructive, but also familiar, patterns of behaviour that dehumanize, depersonalize, and infantilize. Workers submit or risk losing their jobs. Rationalizing submission may be, therefore, a prerequisite to maintaining employment (thereby sustaining attachment). In particular, workers who find that sadistic-masochistic relational patterns at work are familiar configurations of childhood abuse and neglect may have well established psychological coping mechanisms already in place. For these individuals love and attachment are fused with abuse and sadism: workplace abuse is not merely tolerated it may be embraced (Masterson, 1988). Love and hate are forms of object attachment. Thus, our explanation cannot be as simple as blaming the leadership of the culture, since the followers seem to reinforce and perpetuate this vicious cycle of psychic deadness.

This experience of moral violence at work and its concomitant psychological defences may be understood from various psychoanalytic

schools of thought. We have found the object-relations perspective most insightful, along with some assistance from self-psychology. In particular, we explore what is described as 'psychic deadness' from the theoretical position of Melanie Klein's (and post-Kleinian object relational theorists) conception of 'excessive splitting' (Klein, 1946; Bion, 1965, 1970; Eigen, 1996).⁴

Moral violence in organizations, as we define it, is located by illuminating the punishing nature of individual-organizational attachments, what Benjamin (1988) calls 'the problem of domination' and the presence of narcissistic and persecutory emotional bonds (transference) between individual members and their organizational leadership (Diamond, 1997; Kernberg, 1998; Kets de Vries, 2001). In cases such as these, narcissistic attachments are organized around unconscious demands for self and other aggrandizement and embellishment, while persecutory attachments are shaped by perpetrator and victim (sadistic-masochistic) identities. In particular, transference of past experiences and accompanying feelings associated with abuse and parental failures, are triggered by the presence of unconsciously familiar organizational dynamics. Also, emotional bonds and transference dynamics are understood as a predominant feature of hierarchically structured human relations. We define *transference* as the 'displacement of patterns of feelings, thoughts, and behavior, originally experienced in relation to significant figures during childhood, onto a person involved in a current interpersonal relationship' (Moore and Fine, 1990, p. 196; Diamond and Allcorn, 2003).

Evidence of such cultures is, therefore, discovered by what we as psychoanalytic consultants and researchers observe in the interpersonal (intra- and intersubjective) relations between participants that comprise dominance and submission, by our experiences of participants' via transference and counter-transference dynamics, and by what we learn from the victims' narratives and stories, which often include themes of oppression and persecution. It is our experience, in studying and consulting with American (and several multinational) organizations, that workers frequently portray their government agencies and companies as cruel and violent.⁵ In so doing, they are not, typically, implying that people physically harm or assault one another. They are, however, indicating their experience of emotional assault and the potential for ongoing destructive interpersonal transgressions. More specifically, they are referring to oppressive leadership, management by intimidation, and a lack of mutual respect, recognition, and trust – all of which are demoralizing and dehumanizing factors at work. These victims are conveying a form of emotional abuse that renders them depersonalized, traumatized, broken and split apart – psychologically deadened.

We also note that many organizational, social and behavioural scientists are familiar with research on physical violence in the workplace, such as worker on worker attacks and homicides. Much has been written on this subject (Monahan, 1995; VandenBos and Bulatoa, 1996; Capozzoli and McVey, 1996; Braverman, 1999). However, few insights are offered from a psychoanalytic perspective (Diamond, 1997; Stein, 2001). Few studies have addressed the more covert and less visible hostility that strikes at the heart and spirit of workers by diminishing and often destroying meaningful and rewarding work and trusting interpersonal relations (Allcorn *et al.*, 1996). Rather, organizational studies that have addressed such issues as morale, satisfaction, turnover and absenteeism, have possibly, unintentionally endorsed the sadism of dominance and submission by focusing on so-called 'worker motivation' as a tool of management rooted in a 'reward-punishment' psychology (Levinson, 1973). In contrast, our task is focused on understanding the psychological underpinnings of organizational culture and leadership that serve to create a context that makes commonplace acts of workplace brutality not simply acceptable but routine.

ORGANIZATIONS AS MORALLY VIOLENT SETTINGS

In order to understand the psychodynamic composition of moral violence in organizations, we think it is vital to explore the meaning behind employees' allusions to their organizations as violent. Here, we refer to instances where violence implies an overarching experience of fear, intimidation, retribution, betrayal, and paranoia. Most organizations and their participants move in and out of morally violent phases and acts. Moral violence can take the shape of mass terminations, public humiliations, or simply unplanned and non-participatory reorganizations and change. Actions such as these are viewed as so routine as to constitute 'taken for granted' elements of culture that organize experience and create meaning for participants (Schein, 1985). In fact, we assert that, while much can be learned from studying organizations in which physical violence has occurred, more can be learned and prevented from examining organizations in which members articulate workplace experiences filled with violent images and metaphors that stir feelings and emotions at the heart of these destructive cultures. These commonly heard workplace warnings underscore the violent nature implicit within the workplace: 'It's a jungle out there!' 'Keep your head down!' 'Watch your back!' 'Cover your ass!' Consultants are often referred to as 'terminators' and 'hatchet men'. These are not mere signifiers of fantasy. Rather they are rooted in collective experiences and perceptions.

This experience of organizational life is familiar to psychoanalytic consultants who engage participants' transference of emotions. Over many years of intervention research,⁶ we have often listened to organizational members who tell stories of persecution and victimization, narratives ripe with metaphors of cruelty and embattlement. To us it not only sounds violent, it feels threatening and foreboding to be within these organizations. These observations and experiences are expressed in the following vignettes.

The vignettes provide a number of perspectives that inform an understanding of moral violence in the workplace. Each vignette, in its divergence, permits us to locate what is convergent in the subtext. What these vignettes share in common is the sense that management is somehow morally and ethically justified in taking these actions: actions frequently viewed by management as merely a thread in the fabric of the contemporary American workplace. In these vignettes, emotionally traumatized workers share a profound sense of alienation, helplessness, and submission. Minimized and objectified, these workers experience themselves as bullied, threatened, and intimidated. The creative meaning, identity, self-worth, and personal satisfaction of human work, vanishes under the weight and force of inordinate power, control, and subordination, producing anxiety and paranoia among workers.

Case vignettes

An internal consultant to a large health care organization remarked: 'My experience at Health West⁷ was one of encountering a culture filled with violence. That is, if I said it was dangerous to work there, few [employees] would disagree. The potential for violent outcomes had a pervasive quality, one that filled the organization with a sense of danger. I was told not to put anything in email or phone messages that I did not want to have forwarded throughout the organization, especially to the highest levels.

A discussion with the administrative assistant who supported the president of a division of this organization was also revealing. She reported that during her 18 months of tenure almost everyone else had left. She was, in fact, reporting to a new division president, the third in as many years. People feared and mistrusted each other, yet their task responsibilities were interdependent. One recently departed employee from the same organization wrote:

Most people that work for Paul [the CEO] quit or get fired. Paul can't tolerate anyone smarter than he is and most people are smarter, so he fires them because of his ego or they quit because Health West is one of the most messed up companies on planet earth. Their stock will soon be trading via pink sheets.

Apparently many at Health West found that they could not be themselves, particularly if being oneself (maintaining self-integrity and authenticity) meant contradicting Paul's need for security, control, aggrandizement and omnipotence. However, being compliant and inauthentic has emotional and organizational costs. On the organizational side, systemic learning becomes problematic and for the individual the emotional dimension is split-off from the real self to create a compliant deadened self-experience devoid of creativity, innovation, learning, play, passion and emotion.

In another instance, a colleague shared with us his experience with a public agency. Fifteen top managers, during a review of the organization's history, described their situation for the last few years as one in which their past director had created a group of favourites who were awarded promotions and generous raises. Those who did not support the director's 'larger than life view of herself' did not receive promotions or raises despite their seniority and professional experience. Stories were told about people banished to basement offices and others 'living in fox holes'. The members of the 'out group' were discriminated against and attacked by the director and her 'in group' of loyal followers. Paradoxically, it was also mentioned that the director and her 'in group' also came to feel that they were under attack from the 'out group'. This inter-group conflict went on for years. It was finally surfaced in a contained setting with the consultants. The two groups were observed sitting on opposite sides of the table. Getting their historical antagonism out in the open, created a cathartic resonance. Group members reached across the table to make contact and touch one another – a humanizing act in contrast to a dehumanizing and depersonalizing historical split between them. The violence that resided within the organizational split created by the director's personal needs had cut both ways – 'everyone felt beat up and abused'.

At DPS (another public organization) the director was known for handing out lapel pins to loyal employees who 'worked hard, took directives without question, and never complained'. Employees were called into his office where he commended them for their performance and pinned upon them the agency lapel pin. We learned that workers who received the pin removed it as soon as possible after leaving his office. The pin identified them with the director and it was generally felt that those who wore the pin were sycophants. The same director was also well known for his style of management by intimidation and humiliation. When employees made 'mistakes' or 'questioned his authority', he would call them into his office and upon their arrival he would ask them to step out into the hallway where he proceeded to openly and loudly verbally abuse them in front of their colleagues. One

can imagine how his lambasted victims experienced these assaults. It is easy to imagine employees at this agency felt oppressed by their compliance and fearful of critical thinking and legitimate self-expression.

In addition, we have encountered instances where oppressive stress and the persecutory experience have manifested in physical symptoms, such as intestinal distress, ulcers, restlessness, insomnia, drugs and alcohol abuse. For instance, a police department hired a new chief who began his work with a mandate for radical and immediate change – a transformation from traditional to community policing. He did not, however, provide his newly acquired police department with any articulated plan or process for organizational change. Rather, he arbitrarily imposed new rules, regulations, and demands for a radically different culture, on his officers. Shortly after arriving, he removed the sign of ‘police department’ and replaced it with one that read, ‘service department’. This left officers in an anxious, alienated, and enraged state filled with ambiguity and uncertainty that at times, depending upon circumstances, endangered them and their fellow officers. For example, there existed uncertainty around when and in what sorts of predicaments police officers could draw their weapons. Patrol cars were taken away from many officers and replaced by bicycles. Predictably, this arbitrary use of power and authority and concomitant ambiguities about performing policing duties, and the consequences for incorrectly second guessing the chief, manifested in psychosomatic symptoms, being reported during interviews with officers. Structure and authority can be as much a tool of oppression and terror as it can be a comforting and clarifying tool of leadership.

And what about the commonplace (at least in the governmental institutions of the United States and particularly at the state levels) repetitive phenomenon of reorganization? A good example is public agencies that are faced with a revolving door of politically appointed directors, each presuming to change the agency. Such seemingly automatic (and unconsciously motivated) strategies are, often experienced by staff as an assault. Employees see themselves as being told: ‘Despite your years of knowledge and experience with the agency, you have been doing it all wrong’. It seems worth asking: If institutional change represents emotional loss for individual members, how much change and loss can workers take before they feel numb, broken-down, and cynical? These American public servants are, after all, human and experience these personally and politically motivated changes as an insult to their self-worth and self-competence. Over time, these repeated assaults create an overarching experience of moral violence – a culture (of values, assumptions, and rules) experienced and perceived as abusive and harmful to participants and their sense of work’s meaning and their *well-being*.

From these workplace examples, one cannot help but envisage the paranoia and depression in the hearts of employees – *the sensate surface of the presence of moral violence in organizations*. As organizational analysts and consultants, we often find ourselves surrounded, enveloped, and immersed in a thick web of these types of morally justified and commonly accepted managerial actions that produce violent human relations, whereby, the *human* in relations seems beaten-up or simply absent as an outcome of an organizational history of relational and institutional abuse. In a sense, we are speaking to a quality of despair – an absence of hope. Possibly, at a lesser degree of severity, the reader may recognize what we describe by drawing upon his or her own first-hand experience and the experiences of others.⁸

We now move to examine further these destructive and painful experiences of organizational life, and that which we call ‘moral violence’ at work by elaborating on the psychodynamic nature of individual–organizational attachments.

UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINS AND PERPETUATION OF MORAL VIOLENCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

A psychoanalytic perspective on organizations requires understanding the nature of leader–follower relations, organizational attachments, and the destructive proclivities these relational dynamics contain.⁹ These attachments, at times, may be compensatory and defensive, and thereby aimed at controlling self-experience by using the *other* in the service of acquiring narcissistic sustenance. In particular, hierarchic structures may contain deeply embedded dominance and submission issues that fuel unconscious (self and other) conflicts centred on autonomy and dependency and, recognition and self-assertion that have their origins in infancy and childhood (Winnicott, 1965). Intense, adverse workplace experience may then be understood to promote psychological regression and transference where the individual past enters the collective present in ways that are not simply counter-productive, but at times destructive.

Individual–organizational attachments: hierarchic dominance and submission

People do generally attach themselves, emotionally and psychologically, to their leaders, professional work and organizations. Frequently, the quality of these attachments is positive and generates a sense of satisfaction and gratification that comes from affiliation with a group or institution larger than one’s self – an institution one can identify with, an organization-in-mind (Diamond, 1993). Yet the need for affiliation

and belonging has to be balanced with sufficient autonomy and independence (Diamond and Allcorn, 1987).

Benjamin (1988) calls this striving for balance the 'paradox of recognition' where asserting the self and recognition of the other are experienced simultaneously. An absence of this tension, Benjamin argues, brings the 'dialectic of control' in which dominance and submission are the governing pattern of human relations. And herein lies one source of negative individual-organizational attachment. Subordinates within the hierarchic structure of superior/subordinate relations may be treated as non-persons rather than as persons (in-their-own-right) (Ogden, 1989). The dialectical tension and thereby mutual recognition, collapses. Autonomy and independence diminish. Submission and compliance take hold and the self eventually may vanish. In the above vignettes, we find that the collapse of this dialectic means that destructive organizational and individual psychodynamics prevail. Participants experience them-selves as under attack by organizational leadership and thus threatened by psychic death. This predominant pattern of leader-follower inter-actions is perpetuated by what is often an unconscious collusion between organizational participants.

Benjamin writes:

If I completely control the other, then the other ceases to exist and if the other completely controls me, then I cease to exist. A condition of our own independent existence is recognizing the other. True independence means sustaining the essential tension of these contradictory impulses; that is, both asserting the self and recognizing the other. (1988, p. 53)

In organizations, this paradox is vulnerable to the narcissistic and paranoid proclivities of leaders and their anxiously idealizing and compliant followers. One could say that both the compliant and the resistant employees are symbolically 'killed off' in one way or the other. The assertion of self is oppressed and the recognition of other is not possible. While the resistant employee may leave, paying a personal and professional cost, he or she may do so with self-cohesion intact despite the traumatic experience of irreconcilable conflict, oppression and persecution.

For Benjamin (1988), domination takes hold in the breakdown of the reciprocal tension between self and other (p. 55). Certainly, it can be argued, these are conditions that occur in many relationships, not simply those in organizations. However, in formal hierarchic organizations, dominance and submission are often implicit, unmentionable values of organizational culture and leadership as well as structures that frequently constrain and define the character of human relations. Thus, they become taboo and undiscussable matters, rendered

unconscious over time, and concealed behind the values and assumptions of organizational culture, particularly a culture of narcissism in which hierarchic structure is replaced by ideology and the arbitrary abuse of power and authority.

Of course, there are degrees of dominance and submission from one organization to another (and from one individual to another). Our immediate concern, however, is with acknowledging the extent to which dominance and submission prevail in the organizational culture and are practiced by the organizational leadership as exemplified in the brief illustrations above. It is our experience that dominance and submission are frequently the relational and ideological norm and where these patterns subsist, psychological splitting and moral violence are not far away.

Psychological splitting,¹⁰ projection and introjection as origins of moral violence

Regressive forces are often at play in organizations, as they are in less formal groups and relationships. Organizational structure and mission, one might assume, absorb and contain aggression where people feel empowered and authorized to do their work – reinforcing self-competence and self-worth. However, as we have shared in the vignettes, it is also the case that hierarchic structures frequently endow those at the top with inordinate power and authority. This power, given the narcissistic and expansive proclivities of certain executives, reinforces dominance and submission as a chief pattern of human relations. And, where dominance and submission issues prevail, fear, mistrust, and paranoia, what Melanie Klein and contemporary object relational thinkers call paranoid–schizoid modes of experience, shape the intersubjective character of self and other relations at work.

In so doing, as Thomas Ogden (1989) has shown, object-to-object relations (paranoid–schizoid mode) in contrast with subject-to-subject relations (depressive mode) become the standard configuration. That is, human engagements that are primarily suspicious (paranoid) and split into black or white, all or nothing, categories, stem from an experience in which one views and treats others as inanimate objects or things. Others become depersonalized and dehumanized, *instruments* of anxious and defensive manipulations. This is the psychodynamic reframing of Immanuel Kant's (1929) categorical imperative of moral law and pure reasoning. Unlike Kant, morality rooted in practical reason is not in opposition to human passions and character. Rather, it is motivated by desire and thereby requires emotional attunement to self and other, in order that sufficient psychological distancing can occur in support of

'self-interested' and 'other-regarding' motives (Wallwork, 1991). Thus, we find the concept of *moral* violence describes the repressed and unconscious nature of abusive and instrumental treatment of others in a manner consistent with psychoanalytic theory and ethics.

We also note that processes of splitting, cognitively and emotionally organize one-self and others into good and bad images and experiences. Projection occurs whereby one ejects already split (enemies or allies) images and experiences by placing them into others as mental objects, so that these difficult to digest emotions can be experienced at a safe distance and thus may be incorporated by others. These processes of introjection involve internalization of self-object experiences and identification with these introjects as fragments of self. These psychodynamics entail elements of invading and possibly damaging the other, who is at the very least momentarily transformed by the experience and collusive nature of projective identification.

In sum, it is our observation that psychological splitting (and fragmentation) is a frequent defensive routine in organizations with moral violence. In order to protect themselves from depressive and persecutory anxieties, organizational participants engage in psychological splitting where dehumanization of the other may occur. It is also the case in such (narcissistic and paranoid) cultures that these automatic or unconscious acts of aggression take precedence over reflexivity. That is, there seems to be no psychological space and time for processing and digesting emotions of rage and hatred and thoughts of violence. Psychological splitting, dissociation, and depersonalization of one-self and others essentially eliminate the need for inaction and reflection. Moral violence may then be understood as a form of enactment, whereby one acts automatically on a destructive impulse rather than imagining and merely entertaining harmful acts of brutality. The dehumanized object may be acted upon safely and without moral conscience. Reliance upon splitting as a defence, however, also has implications for the defensive individual.

Melanie Klein described the combined splitting of the ego and of the object as the 'impoverishment of the ego' whereby the individual engages in the 'dispersal of emotions' through processes of introjection and projection of good and bad part-objects. Similarly, Eigen (1996) warns that excessive splitting fosters 'psychic deadness' and the incapacity to process experience. The ability to contain and intrapsychically digest ambivalent and contrary emotions and ideas is lost. Splitting of the self and object is therefore ultimately an ineffectual defence against destructive psychic forces and persecutory anxieties. Similar to dissociation, splitting leads to taking leave of one's emotional floor and the capacity to experience self-contained emotions. This

psychic escapism renders oneself emotionally numb and without a core awareness of self and other. These phenomena have implications for the workplace.

Within many organizations, *dominance and submission* are a governing ideology and moral violence prevails, the predominant pattern of vertical and horizontal relations come to contain depersonalizing and dehumanizing character devoid of meaning, self-assertion, and recognition of the other. Employees are transformed into numbers, human resources, and possibly organizational 'fat'. Routine organizational dynamics may conceal human tragedy. Primitive psychic and personal survival considerations become predominate intra-psychic and interpersonal agendas.

Acknowledging psychic deadness as a frequent manifestation of moral violence and hierarchic dominance at work leads us to inquire into what kinds of leaders and self-experience contribute to the creation, reinforcement and perpetuation of moral violence. Here, we refer to Kohut's (1972, 1984) self-psychology and his notions of narcissistic rage and disorders of the self that arise from inadequate parental mirroring (or what Winnicott (1965, pp. 43–46) calls a failure of the 'holding environment'). To better understand moral violence, we need to explain the phenomenon of narcissistic rage as it pertains to the wrath of leaders, and the shared fury that may arise within groups and organizations.

Narcissistic rage and the shame-prone individual

Narcissistic rage arises from individual and collective histories of abuse, severe neglect, deficiencies of warmth, safety, and love, injustices and shame, which demand emotional compensation for psychic injuries. Many psychoanalytic writers on leadership and organizations point to excessive and malignant narcissism as potentially destructive, dysfunctional, and pathological contributing factors to failure, vindictiveness, hubris, and, in some instances, the short-lived success of organizations (Kets de Vries, 1984, 2001; Schwartz, 1991; Diamond, 1993; Allcorn and Diamond, 1997; Kernberg, 1998).

Heinz Kohut, psychoanalyst and originator of self-psychology, contributes to our understanding by examining the relationship between infantile narcissism, self-cohesion, and self-esteem. In particular, narcissistic deficiencies lead to narcissistic rage. *Self-deficit* from infancy results in a perpetual search for grandiosity and omnipotence in adults – as if the adult were on an unconscious quest for that which was absent in the mother–infant dyad. Their unconscious search manifests itself in an expansive and frequently imposing and dominant personality. Kohut writes:

And the most gruesome human destructiveness is encountered not in the form of wild, regressive, and primitive behavior, but in the form of orderly and organized activities in which perpetrator's destructiveness is alloyed with absolutarian convictions about their greatness and with the devotion to archaic omnipotent figures. (1972, p. 378)

This outcome is in part achieved through splitting that defends against feelings of shame and injustice.

Concealed behind the projection of greatness and omnipotence common to narcissism are mental splits between emotionally charged and volatile, opposing parts of self-experience. And beneath the split and torn apart self are feelings of shame and injustice located at the emotional (motivational) core of violent attacks. Behind the mask of omnipotence, resides a face of impotence and deeper insecurity. If colleagues were only to see and know the narcissism of the executive, they would find someone who questions his or her self-worth and capacity for the love of others, along with a deeper sense of shame. Kohut writes:

The shame-prone individual who is ready to experience setbacks as narcissistic injuries and to respond to them with insatiable rage does not recognize his opponent as a center of independent initiative with whom he happens to be at cross-purposes. Aggressions employed in the pursuit of maturely experienced causes are not limitless. However, vigorously mobilized, their goal is definite: the defeat of the enemy who blocks the way to a cherished goal. The narcissistically injured, on the other hand, cannot rest until he has blotted out a vaguely experienced offender who dared to oppose him, to disagree with him, or to outshine him. (1972, p. 385)

This description jibes with the motivational force of the executives discussed in the preceding vignettes. Kohut's contribution is then in illuminating the psychodynamic processes linking the narcissistic ideal with the associated manifestation of aggression and violence.

Patterns of narcissistic rage, psychological splitting and projection, are observable through the participation and experience of transference dynamics in organizations (Diamond and Allcorn, 2003). These intersubjective patterns of self-object relations are discernible in at least four experiential dimensions: mirroring, idealizing, twinship, and persecutory. These experiences are not mutually exclusive. They are each linked in some way to narcissism and narcissistic processes as a predominant feature of human relations in the context of organizational cultures of moral violence.

Relational patterns of narcissism and moral violence

Individual narcissism contributes to moral violence in the workplace, where dominance and submission shape horizontal and vertical

interactions beneath a veil of rational organization. These experiences of emotional attachment, which seductively and unconsciously draw people together in ways that are at times productive and at other times destructive, are described by the following modes of self-object transference. These modes of ensnarled relations include: mirroring, idealizing, twinship, and persecutory experience.

Mirroring object relations are indicative of directors and executives at the top of many organizations, such as those described in our vignettes. These psychologically defensive executives strive to protect their own grandiose, perfected, view of themselves. They surround themselves with people who *mirror* their expansive and grandiose self-image and comply with their insatiable needs for admiration and aggrandizement. Where the mirroring affect is absent executive narcissistic rage may surface and the consequences for fellow workers are usually harmful and dehumanizing. Failure to idealize this leader has its consequences.

Idealizing object relations help to explain follower experience where submission becomes a prominent aspect of work life. Idealizing desires are an essential component of narcissistic transferences. In the case of idealizing transferences of emotion, we observe loyal and admiring subordinates who find safety and comfort in identifying with their narcissistic executive. Often narcissistically wounded, these workers find temporary solace and protection in their proximity to leadership. They have an uncanny sensitivity to the self-serving demands and wishes of the executive. Idealizing followers are, therefore, intimately linked with mirroring leaders – one dimension of the dyad cannot survive without the other.

Another manifestation of narcissistic mirroring is the *twinship* transferences (sometimes referred to as *alter-ego*) (Kohut, 1977, 1984). *Twinship* relations generate emotional needs for merger, affiliation, and belonging to groups or organizations of like-minded others. While some level of joining with those who think and act similarly is an avenue for healthy contact and emotional attachment and association, there is a vulnerability to *group think* (Janus, 1982), homogeneity, and suppression of differences and individuality. As long as twinship governs object relations, there will be a minimization of tensions and a limited capacity for containing opposing ideas and feelings within a group or organization. Maintaining the paradox of mutual recognition between participants is unlikely when there are excessive demands for twinship. Similar to mirroring and idealizing exchanges of emotion, twinship supports and perpetuates dominant and submissive patterns of group action that follow defensively the dictates of narcissistic culture and leadership.

Finally, *persecutory* transferences of emotion are particularly common in

organizations shaped by acts of moral violence where workers experience a collective sense of shame, unjust and disrespectful treatment. Similar to the above three dimensions of transference, persecutory experiences (of victimization and abuse) are shaped by psychological splitting and narcissistic injury out of which arises a perceptual world of enemies and allies, and a social structure of us and them. In these cases, narcissistic injuries to self-esteem combine with deeper feelings of shame and self-doubt. These workers experience them-selves as unrecognized (by authorities) as contributors and, therefore, devalued and not recognized as individuals, but rather as things or objects. Decisions that directly affect them are made without their input. Hence, they experience powerlessness and feel taken-for-granted, discarded and treated as objects rather than subjects. In some cases, rage is precariously contained, and for some, psychic deadness and numbing results.

These relational transference patterns may be observed and experienced by organizational researchers and consultants. Predominance of one or several transference dynamics may be found to contribute to distorted communications, conflicts, and various forms of potentially destructive behaviour patterns. Nevertheless, these experiences are often shut out of participants' awareness as they are 'accustomed to' the presence of moral violence. In some cases, the prevalence of moral violence (and ongoing psychological brutality at work) does not surface until there is a crisis or an act of physical violence. It can prove helpful to executives, leaders and workers, if consultants articulate these experiences in illustrating to participants (via feedback in organizational diagnosis (Levinson, 2002)) transference patterns that shape strategy, structure, decisionmaking, leadership and organizational culture. In particular, it may help to illuminate patterns of moral violence that explain the predominance of an organizational narrative of dominance, submission, and psychic deadness.

As we have indicated thus far, the psychodynamics of hierarchy, dominance and submission, psychological regression and splitting, and narcissistic transferences of emotions among leaders and followers constitute the elements of moral violence in organizations. Paradoxically, these organizations seem to lack what we might describe as an authentic human 'culture'. Not wanting to lose their jobs, fearful of retributions, workers of morally violent organizations operate defensively and unconsciously by removing or distancing themselves from their distressing experience of membership. If they could, in fact, experience the emotionally violent nature of these destructive organizations, they might be able to join in reflective dialogue, 'dialogic space', about the destructive elements of their culture and possibly avoid harmful enactments. Yet, as noted, this is often not plausible

unless a crisis emerges in which the institutional viability is seen in jeopardy and a psychoanalytically informed intervention is called for.

In essence, what is missing in organizations filled with persistent patterns of moral violence and psychic trauma is sufficient relief from the threat to play and imagination – an intermediate area and potential space for creativity and change. Winnicott's (1965) writings on the 'intermediate areas' (transitional objects and transitional phenomena) provide a deeper insight into moral violence and in particular an indication of what is missing in these harmful cultures of organization.

All work and no play: the absence of potential space and cultural experience

Winnicott's concept of *transitional phenomena* acknowledges the essential function of transitional objects in early development and in particular, the early childhood shift from total dependence toward relative dependence. Teddy bears, blankets, music and the like, may become transitional childhood objects that cushion the traumatic affect of early recognition of maternal separateness, periodic absences, and loss. 'This necessary developmental journey leads to the use of illusion, the use of symbols, and the use of an object' (Abram, 1997, p. 311). The 'use of the object' is not left behind as we enter adulthood and careers in and with organizations. On the contrary, it becomes essential to one's emotional wellness, creativity, and quality of life. What would life be like without music, art, literature, humour, baseball and the like?

Play is that transitional area where imagination and creativity exist somewhere between reality and fantasy. It is also in this transitional area that we are able to contain and digest opposing feelings and ideas, something absent in organizational cultures of moral violence. Winnicott writes:

... playing and cultural experience are things that we do value in a special way; these link the past, present, and the future; *they take up time and space*. They demand and get our concentrated deliberate attention, deliberate but without too much of the deliberateness of trying. (1971)

Winnicott's concept of transitional phenomena provides a clue to the riddle of what is missing in the morally violent organization. For instance, its absence leaves no room for workers' play and imagination while institutionalizing either too much reality or too much fantasy (and escape) – a workplace without a sense of humour or without the capacity to combine play with work. High tech firms, despite the imposing stress of enormous competition and demands for innovation that they face, create a context where one finds employees riding scooters and tossing trash or tiny basketballs into nets. Without the

capacity for play, organizations and their leaders are handicapped in their ability to tolerate ambiguity, new ideas, differences of opinion, critical feedback, worker demands for recognition and respect. As noted earlier, where object-to-object relations (paranoid-schizoid modes of experience) predominate, the absence of transitional objects means that the differentiation between me-and-not-me is at the very least blurred and often missing. As a consequence, the lack of potential space for reflection and holding of complex ideas and feelings, results in others becoming frequent containers for projections and projective identifications via splitting.

In sum, when organizations are filled with moral violence, problem solving becomes unimaginative and flawed due to the inability to experience the uncertainty of problem setting and assumption testing between participants. Dialogic space is absent as well. Perceptions and experiences are not viewed as worthy of acknowledgment and learning from experience and reflexivity are unlikely. Defensive routines lead to not recognizing contradictions, tensions, and paradoxical forces. They are denied, disavowed, and suppressed rather than experienced and processed. In particular, empathic attunement seems unavailable to narcissistic leaders whose conscious and/or unconscious view of worker participation and involvement may be limited to their own self-aggrandizement. The lack of an availability of 'intermediate areas' that contain transitional objects and phenomena and without play and imagination, there is no acknowledgement of dialectical tension between reality and fantasy. There is no capacity for Benjamin's 'paradox of recognition' where self-assertion and recognition of the other transcend the ideology of hierarchy and the dehumanizing processes of dominance and submission.

Notes

1. Moral violence implies an act or acts of emotional and psychological violence perpetrated by organizational members (such as leaders or executives and managers) upon each other and possibly their constituents and stakeholders. The term is derived from the works of W. R. Bion and Michael Eigen.
2. The cases drawn upon for this article are from the United States and thereby the authors wish to elicit the question for the readers of whether or not this is specific to the American culture (which some have described as 'narcissistic' and thus prone to abuse hierarchic structure and power at work. It is, however, our assumption that these issues of moral violence and the arbitrary use of power extend beyond American institutions.

3. See R. J. Lifton's (1999) *Destroying the World to Save It*.
4. Excessive splitting of self and object leads to states of stupor and the inability to learn from experience – a killing of experience and that which Bion (1965, p. 62) refers to as an intolerance of *no-thing* (unknown).
5. It ought to be kept in mind that our sample may be selective in that these stories and case vignettes come from consultations in which client organizations request our assistance for problems.
6. Intervention research, based on a psychoanalytically informed methodology for organizational change, carried out with public, private, non-profit organizations at the Center for the Study of Organizational Change, University of Missouri-Columbia, USA.
7. All references to names of organizations are fictitious in order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.
8. We are willing to concede that America's narcissistic culture (Lasch, 1979, 1984) and what appears to be an arbitrary use of power and position in public and private institutions may be more typical in the United States and particularly among those organizations that request our help and assistance. Yet, we are not entirely prepared to concede that 'moral violence' is solely an American phenomenon. In fact, our experience with multinational organizations indicates to the contrary.
9. Individual-organizational bonds comprised of a substitution of the individual ego ideal for the organizational ideal (Freud, 1921; Schwartz, 1991)
10. Charles Rycroft (1968) defines splitting:

as a process by which a mental structure loses its integrity and becomes replaced by two or more part-structures. Splitting of the ego and splitting of the object is described. After splitting of the ego, typically only one resulting part-ego is experienced as 'self', the other constituting (usually) unconscious 'split-off part of the ego'. After splitting of an object, the emotional attitude towards the two part-structures is typically antithetical, one object being experienced as 'good' (accepting, benevolent, etc.), the other as 'bad' (rejecting, malevolent, etc.). Splitting of both ego and object tends to be linked with denial and projection, the trio constituting a schizoid defense by which parts of the self (and of internal objects) are disowned and attributed to objects in the environment. (p. 156)

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