ILLUMINATING A PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY (IN A CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT CONTEXT)

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The study of therapeutic communities towards the end of WW2 provided psychologists with new conceptual models of group behaviour. Founded upon Freudian theories of the unconscious these models have remained largely unquestioned for fifty years. Recent attempts to validate these theories have proved problematic, which may in part be attributed to the quantitative instruments adopted. This paper discusses new work, which proposes an alternative approach following phenomenological principles.

The discussion commences with a review of theory building in the field of group dynamics since the early 1920s. Illustrations from the early work of Wilfred Bion are offered together with more recent examples of group behaviour founded upon the notion of unconscious forces.

An attempt to elucidate the 'unconscious' is made by recourse to metaphysics. The paper concludes with a discussion of research instruments to capture the phenomena under consideration.

Keywords: organisation, psychology, phenomenology, unconscious forces.

INTRODUCTION

The production process essentially comprises two distinct activities, discrete, interlinked activities, and their organisation. As Mintzberg has been able to elucidate for us: 'Every organised human activity from the making of pots to the placing of a man on the moon gives rise to two fundamental and opposing requirements: the division of labour into various tasks to be performed, and the co-ordination of these tasks to accomplish the activity.' (Mintzberg 1983: 2).

In this paper we shall focus our attention on the co-ordination of the inputs. As Walker states: 'There is little point in the construction industry developing the special skills of its members if no one is going to amalgamate them in the best manner to meet a particular client's objective.' (ibid. p1). Walker's point is primarily concerned with the role of the project manager, equally we should also pay attention to interactions amongst the members of the team. How can this blend be achieved? What are the factors which militate against it? In what ways can a better understanding of groups help us? These questions form part of a broad canvas, only one aspect of which will be examined in this discussion, concerning unconscious forces within a group acting to obscure the objectives of the project team. To summarise:

'The successful completion of construction projects is increasingly dependant on the co-operation of firms and individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds. The typical project management team can be considered not only in its obvious arrangements and

relationships, but also in terms of its 'group dynamics'. These are sometimes explicit and observable, but can also be unconscious, which has lead to the conclusion that the group can be viewed as a social system in which its task activities are imbued with, and can even be displaced by, activity attributable to unconscious forces (Guzzo 1996).'

To help develop and elaborate our understanding of unconscious forces within project organisations it will be useful to turn to research on groups, and their dynamics where there is a long history of examination and theory building.

THE STUDY OF GROUPS

The construction industry is of course not alone in examining issues associated with co-ordinating the work of numerous people. Guzzo (1996) traces the study of groups beginning with the Hawthorne studies in the late 1920s to the present day.

These studies, named after the place where the work was conducted are considered to be seminal, highlighting the importance of groups in organisations (the work is reported in Roethlisberger & Dickson 1939). Guzzo identifies a number of factors of 'enduring importance' which emerged from the Hawthorne work: (i) relevance of relationships between groups in organisations; (ii) strength of effects that groups have on their members; (iii) extent to which informal groups permeate organisations.

For many years theorising about groups adopted an input-process-output model. Inputs can be seen as the attributes/qualities brought by members to the group (e.g. personality, expertise) which in turn are transformed into outputs through the interaction of group members (exchange of info., co-ordination of efforts etc.).

The use of such a model provides us with a conception that there is a difference between the *potential* and *actual* productivity of a group; where actual productivity is the total potential reduced by certain factors (e.g. poor co-ordination, uneven contribution of members, etc.) arising from interactions in the group. In other words, the group itself is invested with certain inherent problems. Thus, Guzzo explains, research in the seventies was aimed at 'understanding and fixing group process problems' (ibid. p5). Such a model has interesting implications for construction where there is a burgeoning array of project structures, striving to allocate risk and responsibility according to the particular requirements of each client. Irrespective of the orientation of its members however, each team,[1] its 'success' (by whatever criteria we use to judge it) is fundamentally influenced by the conduct of its members. Therefore, research, investigations, findings etc. which are able to illuminate this area will play a powerful role in improving the 'process', in project teams.

PARTICULAR EXAMPLES OF 'PROCESS' BEHAVIOUR

Examples of Guzzo's assertion that there has been an enduring legacy arising from the work of Roethlisberger & Dickson, in particular 'strength of effects that groups have on their members', can be found in the early work of Wilfred Bion (1897-1979). Bion's work spans four decades and is considered to fall into two distinct phases (Trist 1985: 1): the study of groups (approximately 1940 - 1950) and psychoanalysis (approximately 1950 onwards) it is in publication of his earliest work that we look for evidence of unconscious forces.

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[1] We shall use the terms team and group synonymously, although Guzzo discusses this point at some length, *ibid* p7.

Bion's earliest work with groups took place towards the end of the second world war involving the treatment of neurosis, it provides us with a useful two-fold definition of 'group therapy': 'it can refer to the treatment of a number of individuals assembled for special therapeutic sessions, or it can refer to a planned endeavour to develop in a group the forces that lead to smoothly running co-operative activity' (Bion and Rickman 1943: 678).

Clearly, as far as the application of Bion's formulation is concerned, we are particularly interested in the notion of the 'planned endeavour' as a means of developing effective relations amongst a project team. Following this collaborative effort, Bion went on to write many papers, amongst them a particularly well known series (published collectively: Bion 1961).

In the second paper of the series, Bion identifies certain aspects of group phenomena. The first concerns people who find themselves in a group situation who are 'always forming an estimate of the group to himself' (Bion 1948: 488, col.1). Furthermore, since each individual forms these opinions, it follows that their subsequent actions, and perhaps even reactions to this interpretation will have a bearing on the behaviour of the group as a whole: 'the way in which men and women in a group make these assessments is a matter of great importance to the group, for on the judgements that individuals make depends the efflorescence or decay of the social life of the group.' (ibid. p488, col.1)

This is an important point to make in the context of later sections of this paper. The way in which a person behaves in a group can be considered in two ways: it provides an insight into the individual's own personality, it also indicates the person's attitude toward, or view of, the group. Additionally, an individual can make their feelings known towards the group explicitly, openly, unambiguously, they can also be made anonymously, often through the group, rather than directly. If the group can be used as a mechanism in this way, it is clear that individuals will be able to evade and deny questions about their personal attitudes towards the group.

Bion refers to this complex web of potential and actual interaction as the 'group mentality', and offers the following definition: 'the pool to which the anonymous contributions are made, and through which the impulses and desires implicit in these contributions are gratified. Any contribution to this group mentality must enlist the support of, or be in conformity with, the other anonymous contributions of the group. I should expect the group mentality to be distinguished by a uniformity which contrasted with the diversity of thought in the mentality of the individuals who have contributed to its formation' (ibid. p492, col.1)

What are we to make of this formulation? Schermer (1985: 139) offers the following: 'Like much of the work of Freud, Bion's work on groups markedly deepened our understanding, yet was subject to important methodological, clinical and theoretical criticisms.' Schermer's view therefore reinforces the value of Bion, at the same time inviting others to look closely at Bion's work. Yet Bion himself was cautious about the claims he was making; close scrutiny of his work reveals frequent use of the term 'adumbrated' when referring to the concepts he has outlined. It is a word infrequently used today, synonyms include sketch, silhouette; in other words Bion's claims were at best tentative. It is worth considering that perhaps more researches than scientists admit are adumbrations, rather than clearly defined 'answers' or 'concepts'. This then provides the motivation for a further examination of Bion's work, using alternative research instruments, a matter which is addressed later in this paper.

Whilst much of Bion's work with groups was undertaken fifty years previously, a more recent example of unconscious forces can be found in Moorhead et. al (1991). This paper develops the work of Janis (in Moorhead et. al) and proposes a revised formulation of Janis's model of 'groupthink' to include two additional factors.

Groupthink is relevant to a consideration of Bion's work since it is an example of unconscious forces at work in a group. Janis defines groupthink as: 'a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action' (Janis 1972: 8).

Groupthink calls forth a series of eight 'symptoms' in a group which is said to be suffering from this malaise. It is not necessary to examine each in detail, what they have in common however is a sense of unspoken, potentially unconscious collaboration between members. Moorhead et al develop Janis's work proposing a modification to the original model with the inclusion of two moderating elements of the groupthink symptoms; Time and Leadership style.

The former describes the effect when decisions have to be made in a relatively short period, and given the preponderance of this pressure in the ordinary course of a construction project is extremely germane to this discussion. The role of the leader (not necessarily the formal chair) can be seen to be pivotal in the avoidance of groupthink.

Bion's work provides us with a foundation upon which to commence further study of unconscious forces in groups; Moorhead et al. offer a more recent indication of behaviour which can only be explained by reference to such phenomena.

In earlier work in this area, the author has attempted to discover the whole concept of unconscious forces by reference to their manifestations in a group (specifically, Bion's 'basic assumption states'; refer to last year's conference). This has proved to be problematic and a fresh examination is under way which regresses the analysis to a metaphysical level, by exploring the psychical nature of the phenomena which can be found in the work of Freud. Thus we may turn to a study of the unconscious for further illumination. The following section is aimed at this purpose.

UNCONSCIOUS FORCES, A PSYCHO-PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION

Both formulations of group behaviour outlined above share a common element, that of apparently irrational, unexpected, unintended behaviour. Clearly, Janis's prescription for groupthink leads to ineffective decision making, sometimes with the most terrible consequences as in the case of the space shuttle Challenger. Bion's theories create the possibility for an alternative sphere of operation, another world in which thoughts, ideas may be unwittingly collected. This notion of 'other-worldliness' gains coherence if we are able to imagine its existence outside our every-day consciousness. Thus we might be minded to say that the phenomena arise out of largely 'unconscious' forces. This now provides us with a new direction in which to take our deliberations.

Stein (1996: 144) describes a structure, a list of concepts, which provide us with a framework to examine unconscious phenomena in work groups: (i) individual and group unconscious; (ii) defences against anxiety; (iii) splitting and projective identification; (iv) the basic assumptions; transference; and (v) envy.

Stein writes from the perspective and field of psychoanalysis; we are therefore left to pose certain questions if we are to make any progress in understanding the unconscious: What do these terms 'mean'? Should a phenomenon be excluded from study by a scientist because it has hitherto been elaborated using unfamiliar concepts? These questions will be re-examined in a later section.

The concept of the unconscious has been extensively researched by some of the most well known scientists this century, primarily Freud, and many others using Freud's conceptions as their starting point. It is considered to be his 'greatest contribution to science... his conception of an unconscious mind' (Jones E, in MacIntyre 1958: 6).

Attempts to explicate the notion of the unconscious include Morgan's use of the 'psychic prison' (Chapter 7) as a metaphor for the organisation: 'organisations are psychic phenomena in the sense that they are ultimately created and sustained by conscious and unconscious processes...'; and thus 'humans have a knack of getting trapped in webs of their own creation.' (Morgan 1986: 199).

The mystical nature of the unconscious is also brought to our attention, Morgan invokes galactic analogies, in order to explicate the unconscious by likening it to 'black holes' in the universe of our world: 'in a similar way, the invisible dimension of organisation... the unconscious can swallow and trap the rich energies of people involved in the organising process' (ibid. p228).

To develop a much clearer, more lucid, transparent and deeper understanding of the ideas offered by Bion, Janis, Moorhead and others requires an examination of the whole notion of the unconscious. But herein lies an immense obstacle for this and most likely many other researchers who have not been trained in the psychological field.

We may turn to Homans here to begin our elucidation: 'We shall begin with semantics, the science of tracing words back to their references in observed fact... big words: status, culture, heuristic, integration, authority... too often we work with these words and not with observations. Or rather we do not wed the two.' (Homans 1951: 1). Further, Homans warns the researcher of a dangerous trap to be avoided: 'who does not habitually catch himself as he mouths one of the big abstractions and ask: "what does this mouthful mean in terms of actual human behaviour, that someone has seen and reported? Just what, in human behaviour, do we see?" The question is devastating, and we do not ask it half often enough.' (ibid. p1). An example can be drawn from Freud, the psychological notion of repression: 'The analyst cannot observe repression. He explains observed behaviour by the hypothesis of a repressed memory.' (MacIntyre 1958: 15).

MacIntyre draws attention to common symbolism which has the potential to misrepresent the 'concreteness' of the unconscious, which perhaps served as a basis for Freud's claim to the existential nature of the unconscious. 'He (Freud) is offering us an instructive diagram, a model in terms of which to envisage conscious thought and behaviour... a hypothesis, asserting that the world includes an entity hitherto undiscovered'. (p32) MacIntyre refers to the use of 'spatial metaphors' in reference to the mind, in other words we talk as if the mind was an organ of the body e.g. 'coming into the mind', 'thoughts passing through the mind'. As MacIntyre states, we could so easily replace spatial metaphors without losing the meaning we intended to convey e.g. 'for a moment I thought', 'suddenly I thought'.

The quintessence of the points made by Homans and MacIntyre is that we should be cautious in our acceptance of superficially simple words which attempt to describe complex phenomena; this needs further elaboration. MacIntyre once again provides us with a useful tool, warning of the dangers in using 'theory laden expressions' (ibid. p14). So it seems that one possible way in which the mysteries of the unconscious can be revealed is by attempting to simplify the concept by recourse to the underlying meaning of the words, phrases and expressions adopted by proponents of the theory, in this case Freud; well perhaps.

We have moved from a position where we attempted to obtain an understanding of the unconscious through the adoption of alternative words, to remove the jargon of the 'scientists of the psyche'.

Let us conclude our review of MacIntyre's position, by drawing on the work of the French philosopher Rene Descartes. MacIntyre argues that Freud has a legitimate concept of unconscious mental activity - but this is used by Freud to describe behaviour rather than explain it. It is easy ('one might slip into saying') to say that something happens unconsciously - 'to fall into this way of thinking is half way to reduplicating the Cartesian substantial mind by a substantial unconscious mind. The unconscious is the ghost of the Cartesian consciousness.' (ibid. p73).

Finally, it is possible that a clue to the relevance and validity of the unconscious can be found by reference to Wittgenstein's philosophy. There is insufficient space here, even if the writer were capable of a full exposition, to discipline Freud's concept with the full panoply of linguistic investigation which Wittgenstein provides. However, two brief examinations will provide adequate sustenance for the time being. The second examination is taken from a project in neural metaphysics, the first is a more direct application of Wittgensteinian philosophy.

Wittgenstein (1945, translated, 3rd ed. 1967) offers us the notion of a misleading parallel (571): 'psychology treats of processes in the psychical sphere, as does physics in the physical. Seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, willing, are not the subject of psychology in the same sense as that in which the movement of bodies, the phenomenon of electricity etc., are the subject of physics. You can see this from the fact that the physicist sees, hears, thinks about, and informs us of these phenomena, and psychologist observes external reactions (the behaviour) of the subject.' It is as MacIntyre argues, descriptions rather than explanations.

The second and more recent examination of the unconscious can be found in the work of Coulter (1998) in a presentation which examined the topic of memory within a larger ongoing project titled 'neural metaphysics'. A very brief resume of Coulter's arguments is helpful in the context of this paper since it deals with memory, which can be considered as potentially diaphanous or flimsy as other examples of the unconscious we have touched upon. Coulter adopts an avowedly 'Wittgenstein and ethnomethodological' view of 'cognitivist neuroscience', which as a body of scientific endeavour uses lesions in the brain to explain certain behavioural idiosyncrasies[2] in patients.

What we are able to learn from this approach is that some of the medical sciences are making judgements about actions and intentions whose motivation is claimed to reside

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[2]This crude gloss of Coulter's presentation is excusable in this work since it is being used to illustrate the philosophical treatment of a medical phenomenon.

somewhere in the brain. Coulter dismisses these arguments, calling them 'neural cartesianism' (ibid. 1998): 'although cognitivist neuroscientists believe themselves to have supplemented the metaphysical version of mentality bequeathed to us by Descartes, in fact, what they have done is to *transpose the locus of the mental predicates from the res cogitans to the brain*'

So the answer to the 'mind-body' problem has been confused by the neuroscientists, the 'thinking thing' has been located in the brain. Some philosophers would disagree: 'its not the mind or brain that thinks, its the person.'[3]

A potential solution, a different direction to take, which may enable us to make psychology more accessible has been highlighted through a questioning of one particular area of that body of knowledge. The work which is reported here has only recently adopted this strategy having been frustrated in previous attempts to unravel Bion's notions of basic assumption mentality. It remains to be seen whether and to what extent this course will bear fruit.

METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

How should we approach the identification, measurement, the viewing of unconscious forces? A number of attempts have been made to measure the unconscious phenomena identified by Bion under the general heading of basic assumption mentality.[4]:

'Early attempts to measure emotionality (an example of unconscious forces) in groups was undertaken by Herbert Thelen at the University of Chicago. Much of the work was designed to measure Bion's categories of emotionality. Thelen and his team developed a battery of research instruments; Karterud and Foss (1989) report their attempts to develop some of these for their own use. It soon became apparent that the instruments used had some significant weaknesses, including the pragmatic aspect of the ability of the observer to accurately record interactions in accordance with a prescribed system as an exchange was occurring.

It is clear that Karterud's approach is avowedly quantitative, which is as yet failing to provide evidence of the existence of the three Bionian defence mechanisms. Yet, there is in his own work an acceptance of their validity, they are: 'rather uncontroversial and accepted by most group psychotherapists and psychoanalytic-oriented theorists' (Karterud p316). Interestingly, Karterud's concern is therefore not with the validity of Bion's ideas but a need to clarify the phenomenology of the basic assumptions, to be 'done' by: 'direct group observations, combining reliable methods of a qualitative nature (hermeneutics) with quantitative ratings' (Karterud 1989). Karterud expresses concern and urges clarification of Bion's metapsychological explanations; does this mean that if they cannot be validated in relation to the psyche, they are not valid as phenomena?'

So let us start with the question left in last year's paper. The reflections recorded in the preceding section should indicate to us that the simple answer would be 'no'. Which in itself is useful as a prompt, an encouragement to delve into the realm of the 'psyche scientists'. How should this project be accomplished? Cicourel provides us

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[3]Conversation with Wes Sharrock, Professor of Sociology, University of Manchester.

[4]The work was summarised in the paper presented to last year's conference, two paragraphs are reproduced here.

with a path to follow: 'At any given time knowledge depends on the particular state of methods in use; future knowledge will depend on the development of today's methods. It is important to ask whether claims to knowledge are based on methods in correspondence with the theories and data collected, or whether the research techniques and measurement scales have little more than a metaphorical or synecdochial relationship to the same theories and data.' (Cicourel 1964: 7)

Cicourel draws attention to the dangers inherent in metaphor and synecdoche. The latter is a particularly important point and relates to the danger of assuming correspondence between: 'the elements of the theory presupposed and the empirical elements generated by the measurement system, when no such correspondence has been demonstrated' (ibid. p226, footnote 1). Cicourel takes his argument from the work of Harold Garfinkel who holds a particularly exalted position in the ethnomethodological school of social science; interested readers will find extensive references to his work in Cicourel.

A clue to a possible direction which might be open to researchers, in the light of the difficulties described above, can be found in the concluding sentence from the paragraphs taken from last year's paper, reproduced above. It hinges upon the whole notion of 'phenomena' as the object of study. 'Phenomenology as an approach to scientific investigation dates back to Hegel and Husserl, and more recently Heidegger and Schutz (Jary and Jary 1995: 488). 'Simple' phenomenology can now be found in numerous variants, of particular interest and value here would be 'phenomenological sociology'. This approach stresses 'common-sense' knowledge, creating and influencing such 'schools' of research as: conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, modern hermeneutics, detailed ethnographic participant observation. The common element in these approaches is more a rejection of positivism than any common thrust, thus there is a clear objection to quantitative research techniques.

This approach is succinctly and nicely illustrated by a final reference to Homans: 'Lord Nelson... after explaining to his captains the plan of attack he intended to use at Trafalgar went on to say, "No captain can do very wrong who places his ship alongside that of the enemy." In the same way, no one who studies a group will go far wrong if he gets close to it and, by whatever methods available, observe all that he can' (ibid. p21). It is to be hoped that the fieldwork which is due to start shortly will echo Homan's sentiment.

CONCLUSION

The construction industry is becoming more fragmented, and the arrangement of consultants more convoluted, factors which are increasing the importance of co-operation and co-ordination amongst members of the project team. The nature of dynamical interactions amongst individuals can be considered as both observable and explicable and hidden and unconscious. Attempting to understand the full range of actions requires knowledge of both domains.

Freud's seminal work has provided the starting point for many studies and the basis for numerous theories and concepts. Yet the work remains potentially 'hidden' to scientists who are not trained in psychology, psycho-analysis or related fields. This paper has provided an illustration of an alternative route which may reveal the manifestations of unconscious actions through alternative research instruments. However, it will be necessary to conduct extensive field work before further conclusions can be drawn regarding the validity of alternative approaches.

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