

Dysfunction in Training Organisations

Chris Robertson

When we are trying to understand the nature of abuse, we can look in two ways: either to the past for a historical perspective such as the repetition of childhood abuse, or systemically to the wider circle in which the abuse occurs, seeing it as a symptom of the dysfunction of that wider circle. James Hillman has recently suggested that the language of psychopathology needs to be extroverted towards the social and cultural systems. In many ways this is not such a different message from that of Ronnie Laing's challenges to our 'sick society' or Annie Schaffer's notice of an addicted one.

Abuse by an individual practitioner may reflect unresolved issues within her or his past, and it may also be a symptom of the abusive nature of the training in which they participated. The fact that training organisations occupy such a pivotal and powerful position is sometimes missed by those investigating therapeutic abuse. We tend to hold the individual practitioner as ultimately responsible, when they may also be the victims of dysfunctional patterns arising from their training.

It seems to me that we can integrate both systemic and historical perspectives

by looking at training organisations as mini-cultures in which therapists develop. Whatever the explicit skills, awareness and practices the students learn, they inevitably pick up many implicit ones. Unfortunately it is often the worst habits that students imitate and then unconsciously perpetuate in their own work. Where they have been the victims of abusive trainers or training systems, students may unconsciously act out this abuse with their clients. Just as dysfunctional families tend to produce abusive parents for the next generation, dysfunctional training organisations tend to produce abusive therapists. Having an explicit code of ethics will not of itself prevent unconscious acting out by those who are carrying the pathology of their training 'parents'.

Earlier in this issue, Ruth Green writes of her own cycle of abuse. Whereas her training was didactic and the abusing attitudes were internalised directly from her therapist/trainer, students are just as susceptible to picking up the attitudes from the training's mini-culture. By the time they graduate, students have allowed this culture to pervade them, and so it is all the more pernicious. Like a fish

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in water, the graduate counsellor or therapist may be the last to recognise the difficulties.

One aim of this article is to stress the inevitability of such abusive phenomena in training organisations, and the impossibility of inoculation against it. The 'it can't happen here' attitude makes any organisation particularly susceptible to abusive patterns. As with individual abuse, organisational abuse is frequently denied, and those bringing the possibility out into the open may be attacked for exposing the shadow side of the organisation. This is not intended as a cynical or negative approach but, rather than being controlled by the fear of accreditation or media exposure, we can create an atmosphere in which we can recognise abuse with compassion and therefore contribute to its acknowledgement.

Paradoxically, through accepting the reality of abuse in organisations, trainers can learn the humbling and salutary lessons *within* their organisations rather than passing on their group pathology to the graduates. This learning could include how to pay attention to the symptoms of abuse; what training structures can do to facilitate their recognition; how to provide a place for the painful working through of the experience; and helping potential students to know what to watch out for in a training.

In the chart that follows I have used cult phenomena as a mirror for organisational dysfunction. Cult organisations may seem to be too extreme an example to act as a mirror for the subtle levels of abuse that are perpetrated in training, yet pathology shows itself more clearly in

extreme forms. Having seen the characteristics that lead to abuse within cults, we may more readily recognise the symptoms within our counselling and psychotherapy training organisations. I hope that the reader will recognise from the chart that elements of the cult phenomena, rather than the trappings of a full-blown cult, are prevalent in all organisations. It is the extent of the phenomena that is significant in whether or not the organisation is dysfunctional.

Research on cults seem to agree that there are four key characteristics to any group forming itself into a 'cult'. These are:

1. A closed system
2. Group conformity
3. Idealisation of the leader(s)
4. Scapegoating

I have added four other characteristics which, although less generally found, have a strong psychological dimension. These are:

5. Charismatic mission
6. Denial of shadow
7. Group narcissism
8. Secrets

As you examine the chart you may recognise characteristics within your own training organisation and you may have reactions to these recognitions. What is healthy to a degree may, when mixed with other characteristics, become a fanatical dogma that leads to disempowerment and abuse. While the chart analyses and separates different ingredients of what make an organisation dysfunctional, it should be remembered that it is the systemic whole that makes the organisation what it is.

A CLOSED SYSTEM

A protective cocoon to shelter the family
Enmeshment and incest
Outside world filtered out
Outside influences e.g. from family are discouraged

As training expands graduates become trainers

It is kept in the 'family'. Junior staff gain vicarious power through allegiance with founders/directors. Further training for staff is in-house, outside influence is minimised and the 'group-think' built. Outside trainers are devalued or brought in on the periphery so that they do not create dissonance or confusion for students

No boundaries between trainers and therapists

Therapists are graduates of the training and participate in the training and assessment of students. The students do not have a 'safe' space outside of the organisation to 'think' or voice disquiet/dissatisfaction

GROUP CONFORMITY

Ideology at variance with cultural norm
Security provided through belonging to distinct group
Fear of disapproval of leader
Punitive measures
Belief in the 'truth' of what is being taught without checking

Screening off of the 'wrong sort of person' through initial selection procedure

Group norms governed by implicit rules

Mysteriousness of process disempowers newcomers until they 'get it' or have been 'got'. The trainers' skill is a manipulation. Deviants humiliated in the group or assessed as unsuitable

Authority to give or withhold professional recognition gives trainers great power; moving the goalposts

Subjective assessment by trainers creates dangers of negative and positive counter-transference, e.g. favourites. Arbitrary judgements mean students cannot self-assess, and lose confidence in their own experience. They become alienated and dependent

IDEALISATION

Charismatic leadership offers the promise of fulfilling needs
Sexual acting out
High expectations can trap leader into inflated role of supplying unmet dependency
Leader denies their own limitation and becomes inflated; no humility

Powerfully transforming experiences lead newcomers to idealise trainers

Therapeutic work evokes the inner child and leads to projection and transference on to trainers

If trainers do not acknowledge this unconscious reality, it gets played out through their unconscious fantasies of power and healing — the charlatan

Students cannot afford the risk of negative parental projection with their professional investment at stake, so splitting off negative feelings or denying them

Founders/directors may not have been thoroughly trained themselves and avoid testing from outside authority

SCAPEGOATING

Coheres group around the exclusion of what is 'bad'

Fear in the group of being labelled 'bad'

Dissenters who are not silenced are expelled, carrying the split-off feelings, the shit, with them

Resistance to group norms is labelled pathological, defensive and unprofessional, and student is expected to 'work through' their deviance. Individual group members who do not 'shape up' are picked on by the trainer and group forces may be used to break down defences. This lack of respect often rationalised as necessary therapeutically

CHARISMATIC MISSION

The vision of the leader has a transpersonal perspective that is inspirational. It connects with the hopes and dreams of the followers. It offers a promise for which sacrifices have to be made

The dream of a paradise restored — a strong pull for those who feel lost

Mission of the organisation often identified with charismatic persona of founders/directors

The cost of carrying these projections may lead founders/directors into denying their own human needs and thereby creating an atmosphere that is anti-feminine and not nourishing, but which focuses on striving. How can you put your own selfish needs first when the planet, society, new project, or accreditation meetings call?

Exploitation of junior staff to work for nothing is rationalised as part of further training or of students to do menial 'community' tasks not connected to their training, e.g. cooking and washing for organisation

The promise may pull on the students' unmet needs of their inner child — the 'orphan' hopes to have found home — but this may be a regressive move

DENIAL OF SHADOW

Prevalent in spiritual groups seeking salvation

Light-good/ dark-bad split

Abusive behaviour of leader rationalised as spiritually necessary for follower

Shadow issues not addressed in training course yet they operate in organisation unrecognised.

Like Sparrow Hawk in Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea Trilogy*, our shadow may enter in through the door of the training institute unnoticed in terms of our need for power

Success can lead to arrogance and self-importance. The inferior, wounded side of trainers gets hidden as they attempt to live up to expectations of their new status.

Double-talk is prevalent, e.g. talking about vulnerability while being invulnerable

GROUP NARCISSISM

Followers had narcissistic parents and, in seeking to be special, repeat pattern of deprivation and abuse

Failure to challenge superego rules and develop autonomy leads to regressive fantasies

The leader becomes God through a collapse of levels

Organisation fears testing itself outside and becomes more and more self-referring and self-absorbed

The organisation creates a false-self with which to face the world that is blown up with inflated fantasies and fuelled by the importance staff and students give to their own activities. Trainers and students mirror each others' narcissistic needs and protect each other from painful disconfirmation. The false-self becomes impervious to external criticism as a way of defending against the hollowness inside

Lack of differentiation within the organisation leads to an inflated organisational ego which subsumes the 'soul'

Founders/ directors are often the focus of projected fantasies of omnipotence which they may accept as realistic confirmations

SECRETS

They help bind the group together — they are sworn to secrecy

Family secrets are picked up unconsciously and acted out by the children. Family myths are created around these secrets and constellate in potentially destructive rules of behaviour

Secrets give power to those who know them and mark them off as the 'in' group within a hierarchy, excluding others

Secrets give a rational base for paranoid defences against the loss of the secret to 'unbelievers'

The secret can take on mystical properties of the organisational life-blood which if revealed through an act of betrayal would mean the death of the organisation. In fact it may shatter the false self of the organisation

I am aware that there are many aspects of this chart that might need further elucidation and that I have not suggested what sort of training structures might be put in place to recognise, contain and

potentially transform group pathology. Yet I hope that I have provided something to chew on, and that it will help you come to your own conclusions about abuse in training.

As always, readers' comments and observations will be welcomed by *Self & Society*, or you can write directly to Chris Robertson at Re-Vision, 8, Chatsworth Road, London NW2 4BN.