# SOCIAL DEFENSES AND 21st CENTURY ORGANIZATIONS: A tribute to the contribution of Isabel Menzies Lyth

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**ABSTRACT**: The author addresses the concept of social defenses as originated by Isabel Menzies Lyth. He reviews the origin and development of the concept, discusses some of the challenges encountered in using it in the service of meaningful change, and finally highlights some features of emerging 21st century organizations that are well suited for social defense analysis. Social Defenses, in Menzies Lyth's sense, are aspects of organizations that: 1. exist independently of their members, such as structures and policies; and 2. come to serve the purpose of reinforcing peoples' defenses against the primitive anxieties stimulated in the workplace. The concept illuminates otherwise hidden sources of resistance to change and, as such, provides a valuable perspective on the challenges of continuous change and adaptation required of contemporary organizations.

Key words: social defense / organizational psychodynamics / Isabel Menzies Lyth / Tavistock Institute

## Introduction

In the introduction to her collected works Isabel Menzies Lyth comments that compiling the papers evoked some of the excitement of the projects themselves. The opportunity to write this has likewise called to mind many of the wonderful experiences of working with Isabel and has reminded me again of how much I learned from her. I would like to offer a note of thanks to the conference organizers for providing this opportunity to think freshly about her contributions to our theory and practice.

Of the many memories that came to mind while preparing this article, one that stands out is when I invited her to join the staff the first time I directed a group relations conference. As the staff went off to the first small groups one of them asked, in a rather confrontational tone, what was I going to do when they were off working. Seeing that I hadn't the slightest idea, Isabel suggested that I would be "creating space." I learned something about leadership and management from that, but more importantly, the vignette symbolizes how her thinking has created so much "space" for understanding throughout my professional life. Of her many ideas, insights and theoretical contributions the most important is the concept of social defenses, which is the focus of this

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discussion. My intention is to look back at the origins of the concept and ahead to its relevance for 21st century organizations.

## Origins of Social Defense Theory

The extraordinary creativity at the Tavistock Institute in the 50's and 60's was fertile soil for Isabel's pioneering work. Groundbreaking projects during WWII and shortly thereafter had led to the belief that object relations theory could unify the psychological and social fields. Great strides in understanding groups, organizations and larger social units were being made by the remarkable collection of brilliant thinkers who were building interdisciplinary "intellectual machinery" that provided a basis for rendering the impact of unconscious forces visible in social and organizational life.

Isabel's seminal nursing study (1961) built upon and extended Elliot Jaques' (1955) work on how social systems function as a defense against persecutory and depressive anxiety. Yet she also came to a very different viewpoint. I think one reason she often referenced the psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel's observation that while institutions are created to satisfy the needs of people, they take on characteristics that are independent of the individuals in them, is that his comment underscores the differences between her views and those of Jacques.

For Jaques the system is essentially a fantasy, an invention. For Isabel the system is more than a reflection of unconscious dynamics. It has real, enduring and impersonal qualities. These elements of organizational life – structures, practices, policies, technologies, methods of working, patterns of decision making, the distribution of authority, and so on – are the "stuff" of social defenses. While these aspects of organizational life exist to facilitate work, they come to be utilized for the additional purpose of helping people manage anxiety.

What makes social defenses so effective is that they either eliminate situations that expose people to anxiety-provoking activity altogether or they insulate people from the consequences of their actions[2]. The nursing service was an ideal setting for crystallizing the concept. Its approach to scheduling, decision making, and work assignment created a depersonalized and fragmented pattern of care. Coupled with infantilizing management practices, the system promoted dependency, ritualistic work, impersonal relationships with patients, and other characteristics that had the effect of shielding nurses from the painful anxieties stimulated by close and intimate contact with patients and their families.

The ineffectiveness of the nursing service led to insights about the secondary effects of social defense systems. Heightened turnover, disaffection of the most talented nursing students, and other indicators of low morale exposed the effect of rigid social defenses on task accomplishment and, as a consequence, a negative impact on the developmental potential contained in effective work arrangements. Ineffective, unsatisfying and dispiriting work practices were maintained because these same organizational "building blocks" had come to be unconsciously used for the added purpose of managing primitive emotion rather than for facilitating competent work.

Discovering the mutually reinforcing connection between the organizational arrangements that were functioning as social defenses and individual psychic defenses led her to yet another major insight. Organizational change also (inadvertently) modifies the social defense system, weakening

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[2] I am indebted to Larry Gould for this observation

the buttressing provided to individual's psychic defenses. The prospect of change, then, is accompanied by the prospect of frightening emotional experience coming to the surface. This, in turn, stimulates resistance to change. This insight deepened our understanding of why so many reorganizations fail, regardless of how sensible they might be.

As is common with powerful and compelling ideas, the concept of social defenses has been expanded, adapted and refocused, often in interesting ways and sometimes in confusing ways. On close examination it can be difficult to pinpoint social defenses. Nevertheless, Isabel was emphatically clear about what they are not. Always mindful of the potential for logical mischief, she was insistent that social defenses are not psychic defenses writ large: such defenses are operated by individuals alone, not by groups and certainly not by organizations. While splitting and projective processes appear in many forms in organizations, social defense refers specifically to impersonal elements of institutions that exist separately from the people in them and that are utilized by people to buttress individual defenses through processes of projection and introjection.

Through many research projects and consultancies Menzies developed this major advance in systems psychodynamics. Throughout, her aim was to help people confront the reality of their work situations, promote mature collaborative relationships and foster integrated relationships between care-givers and their patients. Her concern was with how primitive mental states are evoked by work situations, how they interfered with sophisticated work, and how corresponding anxieties reverberated through the social and organizational world. Also underlying the entire body of work was an affirmation of the developmental and reparative potential of work and the belief that one of the most important gratifications of adult life is the ability to work well.

Throughout, Isabel exquisitely exemplified two defining features of what is often referred to as the Tavistock tradition. One is the emphasis on practicality -- developing theory that is judged by its usefulness -- which was formalized as "Action Research" methodology. Second was a commitment to the interdisciplinary integration of different perspectives. What gave so much of her theory, and especially the idea of social defenses, its distinctive creativity was the integration of psychoanalytic thinking with systems theory and management science.

Isabel was a trailblazer. Her inspired work has informed countless projects and papers, and has been a presence in the professional development of so many. She deeply enriched my understanding and on a personal level I am deeply grateful for her help, encouragement, and criticism.

Yet there is also a bittersweet quality to the arc of her work. The great transformative potential of social defense analysis went largely unfulfilled in the course of her work (Spillius, 1990). Few of her projects produced the deep, transformative change that seemed within the scope of her thinking. The nursing study, for example, largely fell on deaf ears. To quote:

> "I should like to mention a particular serious limitation from which it suffered. It did not prove possible for a number of reasons effectively to involve in the study the other two main social subsystems in the hospital: medical and lay. This meant, in effect, that change in the nursing system was limited to such changes as could be introduced without requiring any major balancing adjustments in the other subsystems" (vol. 1, p. 127).

Speaking more generally about her work:

> "This highlights a difficulty which I, at least, have not solved: that of bringing about change in a large organization composed of individual smaller units. While one may change one small unit by working in it, how does one affect the others? How does one spread the model? (vol. 2, xi)

Isabel's contemporaries faced similar barriers, which led some of her Tavistock colleagues to shift focus from single entities to larger contexts, concentrating on the interconnectedness of systems and exploring environmental dynamics. Eric Trist, for example, re-centered his work from the socio-psychological context of work to the social ecology of organizations in search of what he famously called "new directions of hope" (1997), anchored in new inter-organizational and community patterns.

Encountering such obstacles was undoubtedly frustrating, especially against the background of hope and expectation that her thinking engendered. Something else that I think contributed to Isabel's frustration was the accelerating social, economic and political change and, as a consequence, the shifting ground of social defenses. Isabel's work was based on paradigms of social life and strategies of containment that were beginning to crumble as society shifted to post-industrialism. It was up to the next generation to bring social defense thinking into relationship with new notions of family, organization and community life.

## Emerging Organizations

Now we are in the midst of further organizational transformation, characterized by digitization and globalization. New images of social organization, with different rules, grammars, rituals, and practices are reshaping the projective landscape of organizations, just as they did in the post-war era. As these notions shift, the complex connections between individual and context inevitably lead to questions about how systems psychodynamic thinking is to remain vital and relevant.

Much valuable work has been done about this from the systems psychodynamic standpoint (e.g. Armstrong, 2005; Dartington, 2004; Long, 2008; Hirschhorn, 1990). Among the features of emerging organizations that require new ways of thinking about unconscious processes and social defenses are:

- the diminished role of small groups and of stable, clearly bounded social entities;
- networks, rather than group and inter-group relations, as increasingly forming the basis for connection;
- negotiated, rather than delegated, authority;
- horizontal rather than vertical sources of authorization; and
- a pervasive reliance on computer mediated relationships.

How, and whether, social defense theory will contribute to the understanding of emerging organizations remains to be seen. How new structures and work methods will interact with individual's anxieties and whether they can be used to promote creativity and depressivity rather than institutionalize more primitive relations is a question of great import.

## Global Economic Crisis & Social Defenses

The global economic crisis illustrates the disastrous consequences of not having adequate answers to these questions. We are now confronting the extent to which denial of the scarcity of resources has eroded the viability of our institutions. Surely underneath this denial, the creation of vast debt and the rampant consumption it depended upon, are anxieties that have something to do with dislocation and uncertainty, the collapse of familiar symbol systems at the end of the 20th century and fantasies of annihilation and deprivation that have characterized the millennial transition.

Social defense analysis provides a useful understanding of how the financial system itself became implicated in the maintenance of this frighteningly primitive behavior. But again, it requires turning our attention to the impersonal aspects of our social institutions. Social defense analysis would entail looking closely at how the credit system itself – lending practices, collateralization, derivatives, and credit policies supported wildly irrational levels of spending – interacted with individual's psychic processes and were resilient in spite of being counter to all understandings of rational judgment. What we now see as delusional ideologies offers another interesting focus for social defense analysis: housing prices are indestructible; regulation is dangerous because markets are inherently self-correcting; financial engineering can eliminate risk.

## Social Defenses & 21st Century Organizations

To approach the question of social defenses in 21st century organizations, I would first like to mention two defining features of work that I believe will be critical to any understanding of social defenses: information technology and knowledge-based work.

### Information Technology / Digitization

Technology is no longer a tool but has become an inherent part of the environment within we work and develop. There can be little doubt that it is transforming our social relations and psychological selves. Just as social historians have shown how the spread of reading promoted an interior voice, we are starting to learn how the psyche undergoes change as that interior voice is to some degree displaced by participation in the collective voice stimulated by communication networks. In ten years a generation will have come of age entirely under the backlit glow of the internet, for whom it is neither a novelty nor wonderful tool but a way of life, a generation whose selves reside a great deal of the time in the digital-domain-in-the-mind, to crib a phrase. Much of their psychic and emotional lives, and a great deal of their development, will occur in the virtual realms of the internet. In 60 years only the oldest will remember a time when what we now regard as the virtual world was considered virtual. I imagine it will be a quaint idea, remembered with amusement the way I remember my parents raising their voices on long-distance phone calls.

Writing this, I can imagine Isabel joining the chorus of worried voices expressing concern about how new technologies will affect the Self. Does it provide, for example, an easy avenue for avoiding meaningful relationship and the reparative aspect of authentic experience? The illusion of proximity in time and space may distort how we relate to the world. How do the technologies impact our ability to tolerate the frustrations of reality? For example, whether being able to "know" things instantaneously, instead of having to tolerate the discomfort of not knowing, impairs thinking. Others have argued that it constitute a breakdown of the authority of reality, resulting in less repression, diminished ability to cope with reality and reduced sublimation.

Yet this line of thinking does little to shed light on the role that information technology will play in shaping social defenses in work organizations. That technology enables organizations to mobilize the most precious intangible resources – minds and relationships – has been clearly demonstrated. The overwhelming complexity and fragmentation that has accompanied these changes hints at anxieties that underlie the vast global networks that are formed. Social defense analysis raises the question of how the same technologies that potentiate such enormous productive capabilities also get used to help people defend against the anxieties embedded in the tasks and animating the enterprises. The

analytic task is to disentangle the trauma of the transition from the activity of creating social systems for working well.

## Knowledge work.

Increasingly, workers are engaged in jobs that require subjective judgment and problem solving. Historically the province of management and professionals, thinking-intensive work is becoming widespread especially as more routine work becomes automated. In knowledge work the premium is on marshaling "mind power," rather than mobilizing labor and capital. Yet we understand very little about the emotional containment associated with knowledge work or about the unconscious dimensions of such work. It takes place through conversation and it emerges through relationships, something to which a psychoanalytic perspective obviously has much to offer. Talking and listening are how knowledge workers learn, innovate, contribute, and change. Value gets added through collaborative conversation.

Knowledge work is intensely personal; it begins with the self and involves intuition and experience. In every decision and every conversation, knowledge workers test an aspect of their own personal take on the world – the system-in-the-mind. And every decision is a prediction about the future, influenced by emotions that are anchored in the past and based on assumptions carried forward from a past that is increasingly disconnected from the future. Sophisticated work occurs where people can learn publicly, risking personal exposure in the service of developing shared understanding, and collaborating in such a way that vulnerability is neither hidden nor pathologized (Hirschhorn, 1990).

The phantasies and anxieties stimulated both by the vulnerability of knowledge work, and by the collaboration that depends on linking minds, clearly contributes to the rigid sterility of many corporate environments, which Alastair Bain (1988 ) started to explore in his work on the social defenses against learning in contemporary organizations. Social defense theory has much to contribute to discovering how primitive anxieties are expressed and defended against in the networks and forums that contain these conversations. How institutions can support these creative and sophisticated abilities will require new strategies for containment and social defenses that foster integration in settings that are very different.

I would like to offer some tentative hypotheses about the evolving character of social defenses in 21st century organizations:

1. Information technologies function as social defenses when they enable a speed of work that undermines organizational capacity for reflective thought. Our intellectual traditions emphasize the importance of reflection, and the creation of reflective space, as a critical path to "depressive position functioning." Extreme speed closes off reflection or careful analysis. As the financial crisis suggests, it may also be utilized to interfere with forming moral judgments and help shield people from awareness of the consequences of their actions.

2. The unbounded nature of work groups and the complex patterns of interconnection that form the networks, that are becoming the backbone of new organizations, create conditions whereby social defenses arise less from organizational practices and more at the domain level. The comments about the financial crisis above also illustrate this point, since the social defense system existed at the level of the system and institution rather than arising from any organization *per se*.

3. Hierarchies and structures appropriate for 20th century organizations take on the character of social defenses when they come to interfere with the conditions necessary to confront contemporary work conditions. The systems psychodynamic tradition has examined the ways in which structures can usefully help contain workplace anxieties, yet these same structures that were effective under earlier conditions have in many situations become maladaptive. Knowledge work requires large degrees of self-direction and the ability to collaborate horizontally, often across large distances. Following Menzies' analysis, there is powerful resistance to relinquishing these dysfunctional approaches, including the use of patchwork solutions and matrix overlays to address the surface problems while avoiding the underlying issues.

## Conclusion

The wellsprings of psychotic anxiety in organizations are intensified by the rapid breakdown of containing structures in both the social and organizational worlds. Isabel was very interested in how apocalyptic fantasies stimulated by the ending of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st affected work organizations, especially what she felt was a pervasive sense of dread. In retrospect she was also prescient, as the disintegration of the familiar world is linked to the emergence of radical fundamentalism which has, at its core, apocalyptic fantasies (Krantz, 2006). Perhaps there is something resonant with our increasing immersion in the digital sphere. Notwithstanding the vast capabilities it represents, there is much evidence pointing to the stimulation of anxieties at the level of existence, given its tendency toward virtual relationships, the creation of semblance, and confusion of symbol with reality.

Understanding how and where social defenses will be constructed to help people shield themselves from the experiences of working under these conditions will be an important contribution to both the well being and success of 21st century workers. To this exploration I believe the concept of social defense systems has much to offer, as long as we don't succumb to the defensive temptations of sentimentality or longing for earlier modes of containment. Developing human, sentient, systems that mesh effectively with the new realities and practices will require a more realistic appreciation of human functioning and of the unconscious, non-rational dimension of economic and organizational life than exists today in the minds of policy makers and institutional architects.

For this we could benefit immensely from a latter-day 21st century Isabel Menzies.

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