The Dilemmas of Ignorance

by Philip Boxer

We hear a lot about new ways of doing business. We hear about new forms of 'virtual' organisation, and about revolutions in the way we – as customers and clients – will be enabled to live our lives. We hear that this is to come about through the *strategies* pursued by businesses, which will produce 'revolutions' in the way industries are organised.

But in what sense can 'strategy' be 'revolution'? This cannot be 'strategy' as in 'long-range planning'. Instead, it is 'strategy' as *the management of ignorance*. Hamel[1] - for instance - encourages businesses to change what they ordinarily *ignore*, in order to create new possibilities for growth and development. A process such as this cannot be wholly rational, otherwise it would indeed boil down to yet another form of 'long-range planning'. So how are we to make sense of this idea of 'managing ignorance'? One way of approaching this question is to consider the relationship of the conscious ego to the Freudian unconscious. From this perspective, 'revolution' becomes an effect of 'listening' to unconscious processes.

The Tavistock paradigm

In the English-speaking world, it is difficult to think of listening in this way without considering the legacy of the work of the Tavistock - whether this means the Tavistock Clinic or the Institute[2]. Although this work is rooted in the Tavistock, it represents a much broader approach to organisations, due to the way it rests on a *socio-technical systems approach* to organisations. Predominantly, however, it adopts a view of the individual's relationship to the organisation that is based ultimately upon a Kleinian theory of object-relations. I shall refer to this broad approach as the *Tavistock paradigm*.[3]

My own experience of this paradigm reflects the view of Paul Hoggett, that:

> [It is] frustratingly marginal to the concerns of those British practitioners to whom… [it] should have an enormous relevance – [such as:] change agents in organisational and social systems, managers and policy makers in the human services, etc. (Hoggett, 1997:132).

The aim of this chapter, then, is to engage critically with the Tavistock paradigm, and to ask how exactly it might have become 'frustratingly marginal'.[4] This is not to dismiss the

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1 See Hamel 1996

2 The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations was founded in 1946 to pursue interdisciplinary action research in relating the needs of society to the psychological and social sciences. Its founders had been at the Tavistock Institute of Medical Psychology (the Clinic), which was itself founded in 1920 as an outpatient clinic. Both the Clinic and the Institute continue to be active in the field of consulting to organisations. (See the chapter on the Foundation and Development of the Tavistock Institute in Trist and Murray 1990.) The Clinic's approach developed from it's Consulting to Institutions Workshop that started in 1980, and is outlined in Obholzer & Roberts 1994.

3 A more detailed evaluation of this notion of a Tavistock paradigm is to be found in Palmer (1997).

4 Although the views expressed in this chapter are my own, my particular thanks go to the Working Group on Groups and Organisations (GOWG) for their support in developing these ideas. In particular I would like to

paradigm, but to understand how we might build on its foundations, yet learn to bear our own revolution as practitioners.

Criticism of the paradigm

Hoggett criticises the Tavistock paradigm on the basis that it employs a 'systems approach' more as a private metaphor than as a real link to the wider movement of systems thinking. This results in a fundamental failure of the paradigm to address the nature of *relations of power*.

As an example, Hoggett takes up the notion of *primary task*. This concept is defined as 'the task which an organisation must perform if it is to survive' (Miller and Rice 1967:25). The problem with the notion of primary task is that it emphasises only questions of *viability*. By doing so, it obscures an alternative definition of the tasks within an organisation as being primarily a *development of the interests* of those involved.

Hoggett argues for the retention of both definitions – the one relating to the survival of the organisation, and the other to its development. In doing this, he supports the work of David Armstrong, whose notion of *primary process* offers a way beyond this impasse. Armstrong formulated the concept of primary process in the context of a Health Authority providing high security psychiatric services. He describes the primary process of this organisation as:

> the emotional task of 'managing vulnerability', or more exactly of managing the emotional experiences of being vulnerable and of making others vulnerable to oneself. (Armstrong, 1995:6)

In effect, then, he draws on the *psychoanalytic* notion of 'primary process' to define what the consultant is working with – that is, the emotional experience of the organisation *in* the people who work within it, rather than simply the emotional experience *of* the people. He invokes Bollas' notion of the 'unthought known' (1987) as a way of understanding how this emotional experience *in* people relates to the organisation as a whole.

> Hoggett's argument is that the future development within the Tavistock paradigm:
> hinges upon the construction of a more sophisticated approach to "the social" than existing models can provide. Power saturates all human relations, and consultants and researchers are part of these relations of power. Effective consultancy requires a double reflexivity, to one's own emotional experience of the collective organisational unconscious and to the nature of one's agency within the dynamic field of forces at play in any organisational setting. (Hoggett, 1997:137)

Hoggett, then, argues for a much greater appreciation of the 'interpenetration of the realms of the emotions and unconscious and the realm of power and politics'. (Hoggett, 1997:138).

Michel Foucault's 'three dilemmas of governance'

We can turn to the work of Michel Foucault to consider – before continuing - a paradigm which *does* takes account of the effects of power. Foucault approached language games as 'discursive practices', through which the subject was constituted as such, and also made the subject of the practices of power[5].

Foucault's analysis of discursive practice concentrated on the particular ways in which it was possible to speak as a knowing subject, and - as such - to have the power to command others' obedience. Through this he implied that the effects of power were installed in the subject through the very practices of knowledge itself. Foucault suggested that the 'power/knowledge' effects of a discursive practice were achieved through the particular way in which the discursive practice offered a resolution to three dilemmas[6]. These dilemmas can also be expressed in terms of the problems of governance facing organisations[7]:

- The *command dilemma* ('top-down' vs. 'bottom-up', or 'the transcendental' vs. 'the empirical'). The basis on which something can be said to be true.
- The *communications dilemma* ('espoused explanations' vs. 'explanations-in-use', or the 'cogito' vs. 'the unthought'). Whether or not it is possible to say what we 'know'.
- The *control dilemma* ('affiliation' vs. 'alliance', or 'the retreat into the past of the origin' vs. 'the return into the present of the origin'). Where in time the origin of author-ity is vested.

Foucault's analysis of the conditions for knowing subjectivity presented the very notion of the subject with a challenge. Foucault sought to answer this challenge in his later writings on sexuality[8]. Both Foucault and Lacan demonstrated a certain commitment to an ethics centered on the subject's relation to truth (Rajchman 1991). However, in contrast to Lacan, Foucault chose a *constitutive* 'ethics'. For him, the displacement of the transcendental through the constitutive effects of discursive practice also entailed a refusal of the effects of the unconscious[9]. Not for him, then, Freud's subject of the unconscious - a *being* where *it* was[10].

The origins of the Tavistock

It is likely that the genesis of the Tavistock Clinic had a significant influence on its subsequent work. It was formed in 1920 to work with the neurotic disorders, initially labeled as 'shell-

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5 See Foucault 1970, 1972; Gordon, 1980.

6 These dilemmas are running themes throughout Foucault's work on the problematics of power/knowledge. See Dreyfus and Rabinow (of 1982).

7 This organisational form of the dilemmas is developed more fully in Boxer 1994b.

8 See Foucault 1986.

9 Jacques-Alain Miller develops this critique of Foucault in Armstrong (1992).

10 I am equating 'being' with the self-conscious ego, and 'it' with Freud's unconscious: "Where id was, there ego shall be" (Freud, 1933: 80). In the English Translation, the emphasis is on enlarging 'the organisation of the ego so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the id.' The Lacanian reading (Lacan, 1988b:194) via the original German ("Wo Es war, soll Ich werden") places the emphasis on the there where the id was, in order to capture something of the nature of the id being always elsewhere – never fully 'drained' by the ego. Accepting this quality of the radical Otherness of the unconscious is a determining characteristic of any attempt to work in relation to it.

shock', believed to be 'endemic and pervasive in modern society' (Trist and Emery 1990:1). This work developed to include an understanding of and treatment for the stresses of military life in time of war. Following World War II, it took the form of a special relationship with the British Psycho-Analytical Society, in which the BPS was responsible for training the psychoanalysts, and the social applications were left 'in the hands of the Institute'. (Trist and Murray 1990:6) This reflected the British Psycho-Analytical Society's own part in 'the widespread optimism and commitment to social change – "winning the peace" - that was already driving the formation of the reborn Tavistock, and that had swept a Labour government to power in 1945' (Mosse, 1994:3).

Miller and Rose use Foucault's notions of 'governmentality'[11] to characterise the part played by the Tavistock in this movement, and in terms of its contribution to three elements of government:

> [A] conception of government as a varying set of rationales and programmes which seek to align socio-political objectives with the activities and relations of individuals; the constitutive roles of psychological and managerial techniques and vocabularies; and a notion of subjectivity as a capacity promoted through specific regulatory techniques and forms of expertise. (Miller & Rose 1988:171)

This stand-point is reflected also in the concepts to which the Tavistock paradigm awards central place: namely, that leadership is directly related to the aims and the primary task of the organisation, and that hierarchy is how congruence is created between authority and power.

The Tavistock paradigm thus entails that organisations are viewed as open systems, defined by 'input-conversion-output' processes. The effective management of these processes depends upon management of the boundaries that make the articulation of the processes possible. In addition to this, however, is the influence of 'symbolic expressions from the unconscious' (Halton, 1994:11), which arise from unconscious institutional anxieties and the defences against them. These are reflected in 'basic assumption mentality' of people within the organisation. This basic assumption mentality is a way of dealing with institutional anxieties by 'attempting to meet the unconscious needs of its members by reducing anxiety and internal conflicts' (Stokes, 1994: 20). In extreme cases, this basic assumption mentality can become an end in itself, thus bringing both leaders and members of groups to lose their ability to think and act effectively.

The Tavistock paradigm's view of the unconscious as being the locus of anxiety, and as giving rise to symbolic expressions and defences against this anxiety - at individual, group and institutional levels - is well defined. In terms of Foucault's three dilemmas, it problematises the first dilemma ('command': 'top-down' vs. 'bottom-up') in order to open up questions surrounding the second dilemma ('communications': 'espoused explanations' vs. 'explanations-in-use'). The second dilemma focuses on the extent to which it is possible to say what we 'know'. As such, the Tavistock paradigm is a crucial and important contribution to changing the level at which the organisation's processes can be brought into question, thus shaping the consulting processes whereby this can be achieved.

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11 Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991

The Tavistock paradigm in context

However, even though the Tavistock paradigm takes the unconscious into account, it has nevertheless ended up as being 'frustratingly marginal'. We might be forgiven for beginning to wonder – at this point – whether there is simply something incommensurable between questions of power and of the unconscious.

To understand how the Tavistock paradigm might have gone astray, it is necessary to situate it within the wider context of thinking about organisations. I shall take Ed Schein's work, *Process Consultation,* as my starting point, since this is regarded as a founding text in its field.

Schein regarded process consulting as being 'anchored deeply in social psychology, sociology, and anthropology' (Schein 1969:13). Here, then, a fundamental link was being made between organisational processes, and the realm of the social (sciences). Working within a humanistic theoretical framework, Schein's process consultation built on the group-dynamics training methods associated with the National Training Laboratories (Schein & Bennis 1965). [12]

Schein pointed out that it would be inadequate for the consultant to intervene only on the *structure* of an organisation. Since people occupy a network of positions and roles, they introduce *processes* into the structure, which constitute an *informal* organisation, and which serve to mediate the effects of the formal organisation. It was on these mediating relationships between people and groups – that is, *processes* - that the process consultant, in Schein's view, should intervene. However, Schein himself never theorized the exact *nature* of these processes, despite the way in which they constitute the object of the process consultant's work[13].

Whereas Schein's work may be taken as being paradigmatic of a process consulting approach, Peter Checkland's work on 'Soft Systems Methodology' exemplifies the *systems approach* to organisations[14]. From this point of view, not only are the thinking models that structure both formal and informal processes made explicit, in order that the combined effects of both kinds of process can be considered in relation to each other. A model is also constructed by the participant observer of the observer's *own* descriptive methodology. This creates a dualism between the models of the 'Real World', and the models of the 'Systems Thinking World', within which the participant observer observes. Checkland has more recently recognized this dualism between 'real world' and 'systems thinking world' as being problematic (1996), in that it seeks to install systems thinking as a kind of common language which conceals both the effects of the observer and the effects of power. Thus, Checkland has come to see Soft Systems Methodology as suffering the same limitations of becoming a 'private metaphor' as Hoggett sees in the Tavistock paradigm's 'systems thinking'. Perhaps, then, what is in evidence here is not simply a problem with the Tavistock paradigm, but a difficulty in the use of systems thinking itself.

Humberto Maturana's theory of 'languaging' sought to address this very difficulty. He proposed that language should be viewed not merely as a 'medium' in which metaphors were constructed, but as the means by which reality itself was constituted as such. This view of

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12 These Training Laboratories played a similar role in the USA to that of the Tavistock Institute in the UK, pioneering a new form of practice, with all the attendant challenges of articulating its own processes.

13 This critique of Schein is elaborated in more detail in Boxer 1994a.

14 See Checkland 1981.

languaging privileged this medium as uniquely characteristic of human being, but also implied that language itself was *nothing but* that which arises in the coordinations between human beings.[15] This theory had the advantage of abolishing the dualism created by Checkland's approach, but in abandoning an independently existing reality, it also abandoned the possibility of a radically 'Other' Freudian unconscious. Nevertheless, as an exemplar of second order cybernetics[16], Maturana's use of this radical constructivism in systemic therapy was developed by the Milan Group to understand the language 'games' of families and organisations[17]. This provided an effective approach to disentangling the different levels and contexts of communication within organisational life, within a paradigm of seeking to 'work together harmoniously', in which power was an effect of the relationship to language.[18]

Jaques and Foulkes

Also conspicuously absent from the Tavistock paradigm are some other key ideas that emerged in the immediate post-war period:

- Jaques' elaboration of *accountable hierarchies* in terms of requisite organisation[19]. He describes these hierarchies as composed of: 'those institutions whose articulated structure and functional arrangements provide solidly regulated conditions of trust in working relationships, and hence of authority with freedom and justice'; and
- Foulkes' problematisation of the relation between the individual and the group.

Jaques' absence is particularly notable here. His Stratified Systems Theory provides an elegant unification of the implications of Foucault's first dilemma concerning the basis of 'top-down' vs. 'bottom-up' truths. Thus, consideration of the organisation as a stratified structure of processes of symbolisation – an *architecture* in its own right - is absent from the Tavistock paradigm, despite the usefulness of this theory as a means of addressing the problem of *inter-group* relations. This point of view brings together definitions of organisation based on 'developmental aims', and those based on the viability of 'primary task'.

Jaques later repudiated the Kleinian notion that 'bad' or 'dysfunctional' organisations were a reflection of pathological psychological forces, to be understood and resolved by the application of psychoanalytical concepts and methods. Nevertheless he continued to maintain that 'the managerial hierarchy is a direct reflection of the hierarchical structuring of human mental complexity in working' (Jaques 1995:348). For our purposes, however, it is the absence of this notion of architecture that is most noteworthy (even though the notion of the architect is not, as we shall see later).

Foulkes's ideas are also absent from the Tavistock paradigm. Considering the emphasis this paradigm places upon boundary management in the control of organisations, this is quite

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15 See Maturana & Varela 1987. Lacan had pointed out the fundamental difficulties with this direction of development in 1955 in his second Seminar (Lacan, 1988a), the implications of which are developed in Appendix I of Fink's book on The Lacanian Subject (1995).

16 See Von Foerster 1960, Bateson 1972.

17 See Palazzoli 1986.

18 See Boxer & Kenny 1992 for a more detailed critique of the use of Maturana's work as a basis for consulting intervention.

19 A relatively recent rendering of these ideas is to be found in Jaques (1989) from which the following is a quote (p132).

puzzling. Foulkes problematises the very formation of the individual and group in relation to the group 'matrix':

> In the group-analytic group, the manifest content of communication, broadly speaking, relates to the latent meaning of this communication in a similar way as the manifest dream relates to the latent dream thoughts. This matter is so important and so bound up with our concept of a *group matrix* that I shall once more take occasion to stress the group matrix as the operational basis of all relationships and communications. Inside this network the individual is conceived as a nodal point. The individual in other words is not conceived as closed but as an open system. An analogy can be made with the neuron in anatomy and physiology, the neuron being the nodal point in the total network of the nervous system which always reacts and responds as a whole (Goldstein). As in the case of the neuron in the nervous system, so is the individual suspended in the group matrix.(Foulkes, 1964: 118)

This is a point of view that closely parallels Foucault's notion of discursive formation as formative of subjectivity. Foulkes uses the group like an externalised model of the mental apparatus - ego, id and superego – the dynamics of which are personified and dramatised by the group.

It is not only the individual that is viewed as a node in a network of relationships and communications. The group itself is also a node. Thus Foulkes – like the Tavistock paradigm - is concerned with the way in which symbolisation, in a larger context, constitutes the group[20]. This time, it is Foucault's second dilemma that is approached through the articulation of a form of 'unthought known', formulated as a matrix, in relation to which the individual's and group's languaging is constituted.

Reasons for the failure of the paradigm

Why, then, are these ideas absent from the Tavistock paradigm? Two 'explanations' suggest themselves. The first is that there was simply no wish to include these ideas, given that the Clinic had no wish to open up controversies between the 'old' consensus of hierarchical forms of organisation - born out of the post-war institutional reforms of which it was an essential part - and other forms of organisation, other architectures, capable of enabling Human Service Organisations to function effectively. This is the explanation which Miller and Rose propose. Clearly, to take up Jaques' project would make this 'old' consensus all too visible. A debate about architecture would lead to a debate about the very forms of (command) hierarchy that brought the post-war Tavistock Clinic into existence, within the context of the newly formed National Health Service (NHS)[21]. And yet it is this very NHS context, with its internal market

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20 David Armstrong takes this question of symbolisation up in comparing the approaches of Group Relations Conferences, The Grubb Institute's Organisational Role Analysis and Gordon Lawrence's Social Dreaming Matrix. Armstrong 1991.

21 This is not to suggest that the Tavistock Institute was not itself being very innovative in relation to its own architecture. Many of its members undertook personal psychoanalysis as part of the process of building it up, and it adopted a Matrix organisation in the early 60s, which itself fed a growing international network of institutions (Trist & Murray 1990:17-27).

and fund-holding reforms, which is now having to face up to questions of its architecture at the same time as the Tavistock paradigm appears to have become 'frustratingly marginal'.

The second explanation concerns the nature and primacy of unconscious phantasy as formulated by the Kleinians. Symbol formations are taken as being secondary to (or derivative from) these unconscious phantasies. Klein wrote:

> "I believe that phantasies operate from the outset, as do the instincts, and are the mental expression of the activity of both life and death instincts. Phantasy activity underlies the mechanisms of introjection and projection, which enable the ego to perform one of the basic functions mentioned above, namely to establish object-relations." (Klein 1988:58).

The Tavistock paradigm is founded upon the primary place given to phantasy by the Kleinians, and also upon the associated notions of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions and their symbol formations. These fundamental axioms themselves rest upon a particular reading of Freud's death drive in relation to phantasy. Foulkes - for one - did not wholly agree with this reading:

> [N]otwithstanding the great dynamic power of phantasies, are we to regard them as [the] primary motor directing instinctual energy and reality, or are instincts [*drives*] and their reality-objects the primary agents, leading to the formation of phantasies under conditions of conflict, frustration, etc.? (King & Steiner 1991:430).

Foulkes is arguing that it is the drives (translated in English Standard Edition as 'instincts'[22]) which are primary, and that phantasies are a response to them. When it comes to the interpretation of these phantasies, he writes:

> [W]e are always given to understand that the elucidation of the patient's unconscious phantasies, inner objects, etc., is the result of painstaking labour on the part of the analyst, belonging as they do to the deepest unconscious levels. Surely, what Dr Heimann describes is the outcome of her own interpretative work with the patient and not comparable to the spontaneous conscious statements, reactions, etc., with which the psychiatrist is concerned.
> (King & Steiner 1991:431)

The point at stake here is not simply the primacy of unconscious phantasy, but also the mediating effects of the analyst's own interpretative processes. If symbolic formations are secondary to phantasy, then the analyst's interpretations also remain secondary. But, if the reverse is true, so that phantasies <u>are</u> symbolic formations, then it raises the question of what comes to be rendered authoritative in the work of the analyst. The analyst's interpretations become as much elaborations of his or her own phantasy (*qua* symbolic formation) as of the analysand's. This is what makes the work of the analyst such a labour: to be effective he or she must be working explicitly within the third dilemma.

This questioning of the primacy of phantasy is therefore at the root of Foucault's third dilemma, concerning where in time the origin of author-ity is located, and in relation to which

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22 See Strachey 1966:xxiv. Strachey points out that 'instinct' corresponds to the endogenous stimuli of the 'Project' (Freud 1915:114), and Freud points out that: 'a better term for an instinctual stimulus is a 'need'. What does away with a need is 'satisfaction'. This can be attained only by an appropriate ('adequate') alteration of the internal source of stimulation.' (Freud 1915:118) The word 'drive' better captures the problematic nature of the drive's satisfaction without invoking the biological metaphors associated with 'instinct', and which tend to detract from the radicality of Freud's conception of the unconscious.

knowledge is constructed – 'alliance' vs. 'affiliation', or 'in relation to the present' vs. 'in relation to the past'. Rendering the *drive* primary, rather than phantasy, renders problematic the processes by which the 'counter-transference' can be regarded as a reliable guide to the interpretation of phantasy. This, in turn, calls into question the whole basis of the authority of the psychoanalyst's interpretations. This problem will be illustrated dramatically in the case studies that follow.

The first 'explanation' of the deficiencies of the Tavistock paradigm concerns the wish of the Tavistock not to have called into question its hierarchical place within the (NHS-based) referral networks. Similarly, the second 'explanation' concerns the wish of the Tavistock paradigm to avoid re-opening professional controversies surrounding the origins of the Kleinian movement. This would run the risk of either re-discovering or displacing those origins. No wonder then that Foucault's third dilemma is avoided altogether, because it was precisely upon this issue that the Controversial Discussions raged - namely, the basis of authority of the psychoanalyst.

Is this the 'incommensurability' between relations to the unconscious and to power, of which I was speaking earlier? This would entail that Foucault's third dilemma – 'affiliation' vs. 'alliance' - is also the dilemma of 'power' vs. 'the relation to the unconscious'. If so, then this indicates that the wish of the Tavistock paradigm to avoid a re-examination of its origins is predicated more by relations to power than by relations to the unconscious.

This is not to imply, however, that the 'wishes' of the Tavistock paradigm have been part of the conscious aims and purposes of those involved in its development. I take these 'wishes' as being unconscious, being symptomatic of the axiomatics of the very subjectivity of the consultant.

'The Unconscious at Work'

As we have seen, whether working directly from Schein's process consulting paradigm, or following the systems thinking paradigm through to Maturana's radical constructivism, both trajectories arrive at the problem of power – as addressed in Foucault's analysis of discursive practices. The limiting horizon of this trajectory, however, is the extent of the subject's reflexivity - of the subject's capacity to know the truth about himself.

This then, is what makes the Tavistock paradigm of such great interest. It not only represents another trajectory unfolding in parallel with the other two, even though its approach appears to have ended up being "frustratingly marginal".[23] It also addresses the question of the subject's relation to truth *qua* relation to the unconscious.

In order to examine this question of how the unconscious can take its place in a paradigm that also includes the other themes of sentience, system, symbolisation and subjectivity – these latter having been seen in the other approaches we explored – a recent collection of work edited by Obholzer and Roberts seems useful.

The title of this collection is: *The Unconscious at Work: Individual and Organisational Stress in the Human Services*. This title in itself raises some interesting issues. What are examined here are human service organisations - organisations which, if they are to put the *good* of the client/patient first, must, by definition, be formed *in relation to* the needs

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23 For a view of the Tavistock paradigm as a discursive practice, see Palmer 1996.

of their clients. The ambiguity of the phrase 'The Unconscious at Work' can be taken - on the one hand – as referring to the unconscious processes in operation *for the consultants themselves,* in relation to those that are working in the client organisation. On the other hand, it can be taken as referring to the effects of working in relation to *clients/patients,* whose unconscious processes are affecting what happens in the workplace. We will see only the latter side of this ambiguity being addressed.

The conceptual framework employed in the book does not address the issues of power reflected in either the nature of the reforms to the NHS, or what brought those reforms into being. Neither is there a discussion of the inevitable 'ethical' dilemmas that underly the formulation of strategies for providing for the 'good' of the public.

Obholzer's 'Afterword' to the book concludes with the notion of consultancy as 'licensed stupidity', which is temptingly close to the notion of a form of consultancy based on an ethic of 'not-knowing'. However, my criticism of this notion is the same as that of Schein's process consultancy: that there is no critical examination of the discursive formation within which such 'licensed stupidity' might take its place.

Case studies: (1) 'Shady Glen'

Shady Glen was

> [A] specialised hospital for severely impaired elderly people who, without being particularly ill, required intensive, long-term nursing care. It had two wings: the smaller North Wing had three rehabilitation wards for those patients who were thought likely to be able to leave the hospital eventually; South Wing had four 'continuing-care' wards for those who were not expected ever to be able to live outside the hospital again. (Roberts, 1994:75)

Two external consultants were brought in to report to senior managers on the way the continuing-care wards dealt with the stresses of the work itself. The behaviour within the organisation seemed closely linked to the definition of its primary task; indeed, this was deeply enshrined in the way Shady Glen was run:

> … each discipline or department had had its own discrete task, and was therefore managed as a separate system….. (Roberts, 1994:78)

The consultants recommended a new definition of primary task:

> The new definition of a shared task required a new boundary around all those involved in patient care. Furthermore, the separation of rehabilitation from continuing- care wards no longer had any rationale, since their previously different aims were now subsumed under a single task definition. (Roberts, 1994:78)

This re-definition was a logical development of the current primary task definition that was deeply embedded in the way in which Shady Glen had been organised. Alongside it, the consultants recommended the development of three new means of support for staff:

- face-to-face contact with hospital management to review staff needs and the development of their new practices;
- time and place for staff to reflect together on their work and how it was carried out in small groups with continuity of membership; and

- mechanisms for inviting, considering and implementing ideas for change from everyone in the system, whatever their status (including patients and their relatives).

The change in primary task definition was intended to shift the organisation away from defining itself on the basis of *functional* descriptions of task, reflecting the *different* professional groups within the hospital, towards concentrating on the way in which the organisation responded to *the needs of its residents*.

The analysis of anxieties and defences by Vega Roberts is an elegant elaboration of the 'unthought' explanations of behaviour at Shady Glen – explanations that became known to the consultants. It is not clear to what extent the open systems modelling supported this re-thinking of the overall logic of the organisation, but it was intuitively justifiable in the interests of the good of the patients. But to what extent were the explanations authoritative for the client? Subsequent events suggested that they were not.

The smaller staff groups and regular review meetings made a lot of sense as a means of airing the relationship between the experience of what was happening in the organisation, and the ways in which people spoke about their experience. But were these measures truly a mechanism for change and an adequate response to the problem? Indeed, what *was* the problem in terms of the larger context in which the staff was operating? In the presentation of the case of Shady Glen, there is no analysis of the issues concerning power, which might reasonably be expected to arise in the attempt to implement such changes.

A multi-disciplinary team was assigned the project of working through the implications of the change in primary task definition. This is how the story of Shady Glen continued:

> Where task-systems have overlapping boundaries, and their members are part of two management systems, the question of who is managing what - where authority is located - can become critical..... The proposed new ward-team boundary, which included staff from other disciplines, needed to be managed by someone with sufficient authority to make decisions about patient care.... In the end, the necessary authority was not delegated to the ward sister, and as a result, fundamental change to the continuing-care system as a whole did not take place.... The failure to implement the report came as a devastating disappointment to the therapists. The nurses' response was more along the lines of, 'Well, what do you expect?' - the beginning of a move back to the old splits along fault-lines between the different disciplines. (Roberts, 1994:194)

So the system reverted back to a functional form. A 'good idea' was rejected due to the historically dominant ways in which power was exercised. But where was the analysis of the larger context in the first place? If the larger context had been included in the client system, would such a redefinition of primary task ever have been made? Is the larger context itself part of the system of defences against anxiety, or part of the cause for that anxiety? This case presentation is conspicuously silent on the very issues of power that appear most relevant to the outcome. Where were the processes that could bring about an alignment of power and authority in relation to the leadership challenge?

Case studies: (2) 'Thorne House'

In contrast, the second case study concentrates more upon institutional processes between the staff members.

Thorne House was regarded as 'a particularly progressive therapeutic community for the treatment of disturbed adolescents.' (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994:132)   Every week, however, the same heated argument would recur during staff meetings, between two individuals advocating different approaches to the work. The role of the external consultants was to address this argument and its underlying concerns. We get some insight into how this was done from the following:

> Thus, what needed to be recognised at Thorne House was the two sides of an unexpressed institutional debate on permissiveness versus control, so that the fight could become the public, ongoing debate within the staff group as a whole that it needed to become. Indeed, this debate taps into the very essence of the adolescent process, with its unconscious struggle between authoritarian and anti-authoritarian parts of the maturing self. (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994:133)

and

> The child who was hurt by Terence represented all of the staff: 'Look what is happening to us as a result of your decision.' Terence's behaviour expressed not only his own rage, but also the rage all the staff were feeling at parental figures who abuse and fail those whom they should protect. At the same time, first Tony and then Terence were used to voice the group's unacknowledged anxieties about the quality of the service they were offering, anxieties which were split off, projected and finally got rid of by the removal of the 'whistle-blowers'. (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994:130-131)

What was irrupting was a fundamental dilemma concerning authoritarian vs. anti-authoritarian approaches to the organisation of Thorne House. The approach taken by the consultants was to recognise that the unconscious processes of the individuals involved gave them a particular tendency to get caught up in the organisational issues associated with particular institutional dilemmas. The key to successful intervention was therefore to use group processes to access the institutional dilemmas facing the organisation in a way that separated them from the individuals' unconscious processes.

So, it would appear that - besides possession of personal insight - it is useful for managers and other professionals to undergo thorough training in group and institutional processes. This would facilitate an understanding by them of the ways in which their personal anxieties manifest themselves and are defended against, at both the group and institutional level. But is this an entirely adequate prescription for what it requires in order to 'maintain a position at the boundary of inside and outside'?

The way dilemmas are dealt with by an organisation can be seen as being constitutive of its strategy[24]. But how are dilemmas dealt with by the Tavistock paradigm? Obholzer and Roberts suggest that:

> Institutional dilemmas (e.g. permissiveness versus control), like personal ones, are anxiety-provoking, and regularly give rise to the kinds of defensive projective processes described above. (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994:133)

Granted, it is important to understand how institutions use individual members to express fundamental institutional dilemmas. But to what extent does this provide an adequate basis for working through the implications of those dilemmas in *institutional* terms? Is it adequate

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24 A good introduction to this approach towards strategy is Hampden-Turner 1990.

to trace back everything to the essential characteristics of our own personal dilemmas? And who is to make these interpretations?

Strategies

Certainly it is important to understand the anxiety-containing function of institutions. However, putting it in terms of Foucault's dilemmas, this entails not only addressing the first 'top-down-vs-bottom-up' dilemma, but also the implications of the second 'espoused-vs-in-use' dilemma – the dilemma of the 'cogito' vs the 'unthought'. In other words, it must be recognised that the anxiety-containing function of the organisation goes beyond what it can be *said* that the organisation is there for.

By re-formulating primary task in terms of primary process, Armstrong addresses this sense in which the work of the consultant goes beyond what can be *said* that the organisation is there for[25]. In this way, then, we might say that he does indeed elaborate the Tavistock paradigm in relation to the second dilemma, as it applies to the organisation itself. But the consultant's interpretation of both this notion of primary process, and the interpretation of institutional dilemmas, is itself affected by the third affiliation-vs-alliance dilemma – the dilemma affecting relations to power and relations to the unconscious. These relations are constitutive of the *author-ity* of the consultant himself or herself. But it is on this that the book is silent. Instead, a number of courses of action are suggested (Obholzer, 1994: 207-208):

- It is vital for there to be clarity and ongoing discussion about the primary task of the organisation, taking into account changes in the environment.
- Authority structures need to be clear.
- It is essential that clear and open communication between all sectors involved be maintained.
- In addition to a forum for debate, [there is a need] to have work-related staff support systems to contain the anxieties arising from the work itself, as well as out of the process of change.
- Personal support systems should be available.
- Managers also need support.

With the exception of the first two items, these are all enabling activities, supporting the process of change within the organisation. But, apart from reading this as defining characteristics of the Tavistock consultant's work, it says little about the nature of the consultant's role itself.

It is, nevertheless, the second item in this list that says most about the nature of the consultant's role. He or she is expected to ensure that the authority structures possess 'load-bearing' characteristics:

> Consultants to institutions can be regarded as having an analogous role to the architect's, predicting which are the load-bearing structures, and helping to identify what sort of emotional loads these structures are carrying. (Obholzer, 1994:209)

This sounds more like a job for a structural engineer than a consultant. Once more, it is oriented more towards the anxiety-carrying role of the organisation, rather than on its ongoing development or on its continuing viability. Still the position of the consultant remains unexamined.

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25 See Armstrong 1995.

I agree that an understanding of the architecture of organisations can provide crucial insights into the symbolic logic(s) through which they are constituted. However, the metaphor of 'architect' is being used here to underpin the consultant's professionalism, rather than to raise questions concerning the nature of that professionalism.

How is it, then, that these questions concerning the very subjectivity of the consultant, which were first raised as a consequence of the Tavistock paradigm, now appear to be ignored? What kind of strategy might the Tavistock paradigm itself be pursuing *unconsciously*?

It would appear that the answer lies in the way the ontological status of the primary task itself has remained unquestioned. The Tavistock paradigm remains silent concerning the problems associated with the first item in the list above. Although it is suggested that the primary task must be clear and be discussed regularly, apparently 'the licensed stupidity' of the consultant does not extend as far as questioning the axiomatics of the primary task itself! No mention is made of the possible problems with the primary task, and its roots – inevitably - in the nature of the discursive and non-discursive formations by which the organisation is constituted.

Therefore it is the unquestioned status of the 'reality' brought into being by the 'private metaphor' of open systems thinking in general, and the primary task in particular, which lies at the root of the problem. As in Soft Systems methodology, this private metaphor installs a language that conceals both the effects of the observer, and - behind these - the effects of power. We might say that the axiomatics of primary task, formed out of an original *alliance* in the formation of the Tavistock paradigm, have become the basis of an *affiliation* to the effects of power produced as a legacy of that origin.
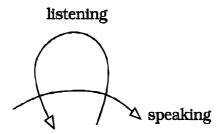
Metaphor and metonymy

The notion of the effects of power is informed, perhaps, by another metaphor, installed through the part played by the Tavistock paradigm in 'winning the peace', and concerned to support the *good* of the Human Service Organisation through the mediating effects of 'healthy' hierarchies. Consequently, in neither Shady Glen nor Thorne House were the nature of the institutional dilemmas themselves addressed. So if this selective blindness is not part of the conscious aims and purposes of those involved in the development of the Tavistock paradigm, then perhaps it can be considered a side-effect, flowing from the assumptions made by the paradigm about the subjectivity of the consultant.

The primary status awarded to unconscious phantasy, and the bio-logical metaphors underlying the formation of object-relations, installs yet another kind of metaphor into a privileged position. Working interpretively with the 'counter-transference', under the influence of these metaphors, gives rise to a particular form of subjectivity which itself is no less an effect of power than is the 'reality' of primary task.

In the diagram below[26], the metonymic characteristics of *speaking* are portrayed as running along chains of association. These escape from *listening*, which depends upon a retroactive effect. Listening, then, always takes place under the retroactive influence of metaphor.

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26 This formulation is based on an early Lacanian formulation of the relationship of metaphor and metonymy, and is elaborated in Boxer and Palmer 1994.

listening

speaking

       Privileging the drive over phantasy is to privilege the metonymic effects of the drive over the axiomatising tendency of the metaphorics of phantasy. The Tavistock paradigm, however, cedes primacy to phantasy and thus privileges metaphor over metonymy. We see the effects of this in the way the Tavistock paradigm regards the consultant's 'take' on 'reality', and his or her interpretation of unconscious defences.

       Obholzer's notion of 'licensed stupidity' comes *close* to formulating the paradoxical nature of a strategy of intervention based on privileging metonymy, just as his metaphor of the architect points towards an understanding of an organisation in terms of the axiomatics of power which an architecture supports. However, to privilege metaphor over metonymy - even though it is the founding metaphor of the Tavistock paradigm itself - is to privilege affiliation to that origin over alliance in relation to the challenge of the case. This, then, is how the two realms of power and the unconscious became separated. The separation was installed along with the paradigm itself. To seek to escape from this separation would necessarily involve calling the power of the paradigm itself into question, and, with that, the practice of the consultant under its influence. However, it is from taking up the challenge of the third dilemma that revolution comes about.

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