

# **Key Concepts in Interpersonal Psychology: Basic Building Blocks for Working with People**

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Welcome to this discussion of some of the concepts that we consider to be key to understanding and working with people.

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## **1. Defense Mechanisms**

The concept of defense mechanisms comes from psychodynamic theory. It is related to our concept of "self" and involves the interplay between our conscious and unconscious minds. Our self concept provides us with a unique framework by which we make sense of our experience. Through this concept we define for ourselves what is good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable, success and failure. Inevitably we experience aspects of ourselves that threaten this sense of self. We may not be able to accept our aggressive impulses. We may find some of our impulses shameful. We may not be able to accept that we are responsible for our failures or that we have done something destructive. At best, in terms of our psychological maturity, we can respond to these threats by acknowledging their existence and working through them in a way that reconciles us to them. On the other hand, our defense mechanisms may prevent the offending ideas or impulses from coming into our awareness. However, these ideas and impulses remain active at an unconscious level and affect our behavior and relationships.

For instance, as a child I may have been terrified by my anger and potential for violence, so I repressed it and developed a concept of myself as a person who never gets angry. But the anger is still there and

may get expressed in distorted ways such as over-intellectualization or self-righteous opinions. In doing so I project my anger into others, and I may find that people are regularly angry with me.

Defense mechanisms operate in individuals and in groups, and in both they begin as a means of protecting. Eventually, however, they create their own problems. For instance, a CEO cannot tolerate ambiguity - which makes him angry. An inevitable consequence is that his managers begin to censor his experience by telling him only what he wants to hear. In another case, a group may be anxious about conflict and develops a norm of politeness. By stifling negative feelings the group ultimately causes irritation to build up in individuals which diverts energy from its work.

## **Reference**

Chris Argyris, *Personality and Organization*, Harper & Row, New York, 1970.

## **2. Boundaries**

A striking way in which the psychodynamics of a system reveal themselves is in relation to the concept of boundaries. Our awareness of the boundaries of the social system and how we respond to what happens at boundaries are important parts of our day to day work with our work groups and clients. By boundaries we have in mind physical boundaries (e.g. the walls of the room), temporal boundaries (e.g. the time a meeting starts and ends), psychological boundaries (e.g. giving attention to and engaging with another person), and sociological boundaries (e.g. the norms of a social group). The boundaries of a social system can be thought of as analogous to the membrane of a living cell and are crucial to the integrity of that system. Managers, trainers, OD professionals, and coaches constantly work with boundaries and deal with groups and individuals who blur or break them. It is important to be aware of these challenges to the boundaries and to attempt to understand their meaning. Boundary challenges can be regarded as unconscious communications revealing something of significance about the individual and/or the group. For example, when somebody is late for a meeting it is probable that this is expressive of his/her ambivalence about coming to the meeting. If this late behavior appears to be interfering with or is a threat to the group it may be useful to explore its meaning with the individual or the group. The meaning that is uncovered is likely to be different, and more interesting, than the excuse that was offered. Occasions when it is useful to do this are when a person is chronically late and needs to be asked to change his or her behavior, or conversely when a person is un-typically late, as this may hold some meaning for the whole group (i.e. a disturbing issue that the group needs to face up to). There are occasions we may be late for reasons outside our control, but these are usually rare. When we need to be on time - for a job interview or to catch a plane - we are on time.

## **3. The Principle of Communication**

Most of us are familiar with the external aspect of the communication process and accept that a part of a facilitator's skill is to develop communication between individuals in the group. We will encourage listening, we ask for clarification or we may paraphrase what has been said. All this is clearly important to developing an effective work group. However, there is another, less visible aspect of the communication process and that is the intra-personal communication, the communication within the individual's self. When we communicate with others we are often hearing ourselves for the first time.

The attempt to put into words our inarticulate feelings, wishes and vision enables us to understand ourselves better. Interestingly it is this intra-personal process of communication that makes Peter Senge's model of dialogue special. An effective dialogue enables people to reflect on the assumptions and models that underpin the way they are understanding an issue. A dialogue in a workgroup enables the members to develop a fuller assessment of a situation and make better judgments. Often in groups what a person would like to say can only be expressed in an inarticulate way, an outburst of anger, coming to a meeting late or withdrawal into silence. Creating the conditions of safety in a group that makes it possible for the individual to put what needs to be said into articulate language is of considerable importance to an effective work group. As group facilitators we are working to develop a group situation (group culture) which supports and encourages not only clear communication between group members but also one which enables individuals to communicate with themselves.

#### **4. Social Defenses**

Social defenses arise through the interaction between individual behavior and organizational structure. Individuals experience anxiety and unconsciously defend themselves against it. They develop work and social patterns that reinforce their defenses. These patterns get incorporated into the organizational structure and culture, which in turn permeates individual members' defenses. The defenses are embedded in the organizational structure, but function through individuals.

Let us hypothesize how the process worked in the Menzies Lyth study. The nurses are put into daily, intimate contact with illness and death and experience anxiety as a result. As a means of coping, individuals defend themselves through denial. With repeated splitting off and denial of feelings, a norm develops. Eventually the norm is verbalized - "a good nurse is detached" - and is reinforced by practices and customs that create distance between nurses and individual patients. The process is a collusive interaction by which nurses project their defenses into the system and incorporate the system's defensive norms into themselves.

An adequate degree of matching between the individual's defenses and the social defenses is required in order for an individual to retain membership in the organization. If the gap is too large and the individual continues to operate from his or her own defenses, then other members will find it intolerable and reject the person. If instead the individual tries to behave in a way consistent with organizational defenses as opposed to his or her own pattern of defense, he or she will experience anxiety and will most likely leave.

#### **References**

Menzies Lyth, Isabel. "The Functioning of Social Systems as a Defence against Anxiety", in *Containing Anxiety in Institutions*, Free Associations, London, 1988. pp. 73-74.

#### **5. Splitting**

Melanie Klein developed the concept of splitting as a defense mechanism from her psychoanalytic work with young children. She identified it as the most primitive of psychological defenses. Splitting protects us from the anxiety associated with the overwhelming rage we experience at a very early age. Imagine

an infant who is just fed, clean and dry. The infant's whole world is contentment. On the other hand, think of a baby who wakes up in the night hungry and wet. The whole world is pain and fury. The child lacks the capacity to deal with the fact that the same mother who is the source of its well being is also the object of its rage. The baby resorts to relating to the mother as two separate objects - the good and the bad. As the baby matures, it is able to separate itself from the mother and see the mother as a whole person and not just the parts of her as they relate to him or her. The baby then must deal with the ambiguous and depressing reality that the mother is both good and bad - the mother who nurtures and the mother who withholds. This is the process of splitting. We continue to split throughout our lives. It is difficult to maintain ambiguous positions towards other people, particularly if we have strong feelings about them. For instance, think about a person who causes you a lot of problems - or who you might even think of as an enemy. How easy is it to see his or her endearing qualities? How easy is it to hold these good qualities in your mind simultaneously with the things you dislike? Most likely, it is much easier to fall on one side, and dismiss the other. Splitting can become destructive when the boundary between the good and bad become rigid and only one side is allowed into our consciousness. It protects us from the inability of our immature selves to tolerate ambiguity and helps us feel certain and right. The certainty rests, however, on a distorted perception of our social reality.

### **Reference**

Segal, H., "Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein", Basic Books, New York, 1974.

### **6. The Primary Task**

What is the primary task of your organization? Are you clear about it? Is your understanding shared by your colleagues?

A clear and common understanding of the organization's primary task focuses and bonds the contributions of the many and diverse groups of people who work in it. However, members of organizations can be frustrated at multiple levels from understanding this primary task.

External pressures can distort the primary task at the highest level. For instance, we might presume that a school system's primary task is to provide knowledge, skills, and qualifications to young people that expand their options for life and work. However, experiences in Britain led me to wonder if its primary task were to qualify students or to eliminate them from the higher education track - which was free but limited. In the United States, schools are being asked to take an ever-expanding responsibility for social and character development of students - a task whose magnitude extends well beyond the time, role, and structural constraints of schools.

Internal distortions of the primary task arise from the preoccupations of different groups and individuals who make up the organization. Subgroups interpret the primary task from the perspective of their own tasks and interests; they may even see them as analogous. Individuals bring in a wide background of experience in other organizations which may or may not be in alignment with the primary task.

The structure and processes of an organization are often developed in response to these internal and external pressures and consequently do not make sense in relation to the primary task. Indeed, they can

be counterproductive. Maintaining our focus on the primary task can keep us from being diverted by every opportunity or demand and can help us move beyond interpersonal and intergroup differences. Unfortunately, the primary task is usually assumed and not openly discussed.

## **7. Manifest and Latent Content**

From a psychodynamic perspective what we talk has both a manifest and a latent meaning. Freud introduced this distinction in his study of dreams. The things we recollect when we wake up from a dream form the manifest content - the events, perhaps a story, the images and feelings. If we reflect we can begin to uncover the suppressed or repressed unconscious meaning.

Conversation also has these two aspects. The article "The Group Unconscious" in February's edition related the story of the last day of a training course when group members fell into a conversation about peripheral arterial disease in which people lose fingers and toes. At a manifest level it was conversation about a medical condition; at the latent level it was about members' feelings about the group coming to an end.

To hear the latent meaning in dialogue requires a consultant, coach, or manager to listen at times with an "analytic ear", that is to listen to what is being said in a state of suspended attention rather than with the usual focused attention we give to people we are talking to. All conversation can be read for its manifest and latent content. At times the latent content is more significant than the intended communication.

## **8. Transference**

The concept of transference was developed in the practice of psychoanalysis. It refers to the tendency of a client to transfer the intense feeling she has experienced at an earlier stage of life in her relationship with her mother, father or other important figure (i.e. sibling). The client relates to the therapist as if he were this other person. Skilled therapists encourage the development of transference, which they then use as a means of helping the person understand unconscious fantasies they bring to their relationships.

Transference appears in all sorts of relationships. It may not develop with the intensity of the analytic relationship but in some cases it may. Most of us have had the direct experience of transference as teenagers. It is a component of falling in love. The instability of the relationship is evident in the our teenage infatuations - the rapid development of intense feelings of love followed by their collapse and our subsequent disenchantment as the reality of the person confounds our unconscious fantasy.

People in positions of authority are often the objects of transference. In organizations managers are prone to the transference of their subordinates, either loving and affectionate (positive transference) or hostile (negative transference). Individuals differ in the degree to which they are vulnerable to transference in the relationships they form. Multiple transference relationships can form in group, not only between group members and the leader but also between member.

## **9. Parallel Process**

Researchers and practitioners have noticed that the interactions within a consulting group can at times mirror the hidden processes in the client system. Moreover, these mirrored processes are often those the client are denying. Krantz and Gilmore gave the example of a project in which the client requested the consultants to assist with the technical issues of reorganizing a department, yet the important issue was the working relationship between the client and the head of the department. This first became evident to the consultants when they fell into a conflict about who was responsible for what part of the work. They realized that they were acting out the dynamics in their clients relationship. Parallel process is the phenomenon of covert processes in the client system being played out in parallel within the consulting system. Awareness of parallel process can lead consultants to important insight into the issues that they need to help their clients address.

### **Reference**

Krantz, J and Gilmore, T.N., (1991) "Understanding the Dynamics between Consulting Teams and Clients", in "Organizations on the Couch", ed. Kets de Vries, M.F.R., Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

## **10. Boredom**

Boredom is often a disregarded emotion, yet below its surface it holds important reasoning. How would you describe the feeling of boredom? Tedium? That fight to stay awake? Nothing to stimulate your mind? While boredom may feel like a passive reaction, psychologists suggest that it is a more dynamic and active process than it seems.

Fubini (1988) describes it thus: "Boredom is a sign of something carefully avoided, often unexpressed anger which has turned into a feeling of isolation, sometimes to such an extent that no real form of communication can take place." He goes further to say that it is an attack on relating, including thinking. When in its grips he finds himself "prevented from any form of clear thinking which could be translated into meaningful words."

Think about the circumstances in which we get bored. Usually escape is impossible. We may be a child enduring a never-ending sermon, a student sitting through a droning lecture, or a manager involved in a turgid meeting - that is running over time. We are trapped in something that has no meaning to us. A natural reaction is anger, but anger is unsafe. Who are we going to be angry with? How can we express it? What can we say that might make things more engaging? Faced with these dilemmas, we usually clam up, wait it out, and complain afterwards.

### **References**

Fubini, Franca, Work of Time and Work of Clocks. Group Analysis Sage Publications, December, 1988. pp. 318-19.

## **11. Group Norms**

Group norms are the explicit and unspoken rules governing the behavior of group members. The norms of the group flow from its values - the shared beliefs about what objects and actions are good and bad. Norms specify those actions which are OK and those that are not-OK. The norms are associated with

rewards for following them and punishments for breaking them. Norms can be about specific behaviors such as "it is acceptable to ask questions in the group" or more complex behavior such as "authenticity".

In formal groups, such as committees and teams, some of the norms may be made explicit as written rules. The framework of norms is an important way of characterizing the culture of a group. Changing the norms of a group is an important way of influencing the behavior of group members. It is easier to influence group norms when they are being formed at the beginning of a group than it is to change established norms. Group facilitators make a strong bid to influence the groups they work with by proposing ground rules for behavior at the outset. An important function of a group leader is to shape the group norms that are most appropriate to the group's task. S.H. Foulkes, the pioneer of Group Analysis speaks of the group leader's function of "forging" the group's culture.

## **12. Resistance to Change**

When I think of the word resistance I ask, "Resistance to what?" In order for us to resist, there must be something to push back against. My second thought is that we are not usually talking about ourselves when we use the word. Resistance is therefore something others are doing in relation to something we are trying to make happen. So let us include ourselves in the analysis of resistance.

Usually resistance emerges as a reaction to change of some sort. In the context of the consulting process Peter Block (1981) describes it as a "predictable, nature, emotional reaction against the process of being helped and against the process of having to face up to difficult organizational problems." He also says it is an equally "predictable, natural, and necessary part of the learning process." (p. 113) It is important to deal with resistance before help and change can genuinely be accepted.

Resistance is part of the process of moving from the known to the unknown. Block suggests that there is some difficult reality out there that is leaving the person feeling uncomfortable, and that discomfort most likely arises from a fear of loss of control or feelings of vulnerability. We may fear loss of power or position. We may be sure of our competence and knowledge with the status quo, but may not be so adept when faced with a new situation.

Block also suggests that a second thing is happening. The discomfort is being expressed indirectly. It is this indirect expression that causes problems for the person initiating the change. If the "resister" could say "I am worried about how well I can handle this new situation," then we would be very supportive. The indirect communication can seem like irrationality, stubbornness, or an attack.

### **Reference**

Block, Peter. *Flawless Consulting*, Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, San Francisco. 1981.

## **13. Projection and Projective Identification**

I struggle with the distinction between the defense mechanisms of projection and projective identification. The simple definition of projection is that it is a process by which we project ONTO another person those parts of ourselves that we cannot tolerate, and then proceed to see them in other

person. The recipients of our projections do not necessarily respond as if the projections fit. They may in fact be puzzled by our responses to them.

On the other hand, projective identification is a longer term, more insidious process. We project INTO the other person the parts of ourselves we cannot tolerate, so that the other person begins to take on and feel the unwanted parts. I have seen relationships in which anger and niceness gets divided between married partners on a long term and consistent basis. What does the nice person do with his angry parts? What does the angry person do with her nice parts?

I once knew a couple in which the husband was extremely controlling - very gently so, but controlling nevertheless. Despite previous agreements, if he decided to do something else he would. The wife was passive and would accept these changes without argument. Often when I was with them I experienced myself acting badly - disagreeing, attacking, being provocative. I realized later that unconsciously I was taking on the wife's projected anger.

#### **14. Intimacy**

An important idea that I learned as a group psychotherapist was that of intimacy. In therapy groups and T-groups relationships between group members progress to ever deeper levels of intimacy. For clients in therapy developing the capacity to for intimate relationships is at the core of the therapeutic process.

Intimacy with another may develop along several dimensions, physical, sexual, psychological, spiritual and intellectual. In our organizational lives it is the psychological dimension that is important to our working relationships. Sexual intimacy can be a hazard in the progressive development of intimacy and may, perversely, come about as a defense against intimacy. The couple may act out their impulses because they have been unable to give full expression of their feelings for each other in language.

If we reflect on our working relationships we may well notice that the most productive relationships were often the most intimate. A psychologically intimate relationship has a high level of trust and allows the two people to be open about themselves and honest without fear of rejection. In an intimate relationship we understand each other in our full humanity, warts and all. Intimacy is closely linked to the idea of authenticity, the crucial foundation effective coaching and consulting relationships.

#### **15. Systems**

When I get together with other OD professionals we all agree that it is important to look at a particular organizational problem in relation to the larger system of which it is a part. Yet when I am pressed to explain what I mean I can find it difficult. So here goes, a brief explanation:

A system is a set of components that all interact to form a whole. A clock is an example of mechanical system. It is also, what is referred to as a CLOSED system. That is a system which is not interacting with the external environment. The electrical thermostat which operates our central heating is an example of an OPEN system. A thermostat has a component which is heat sensitive so that when the temperature reaches a certain point the furnace is switched either on or off. The thermostat is interacting with the environment. Living organisms are biological systems from the simplest amoeba to the complex human



animal. As a biological entity a human being is a system comprised of many sub-systems and sub-sub-systems. We understand that if one part of the total system is out of balance that this can have its effect on other parts of the body. This way of thinking is important to medicine and the other natural sciences.

OD practitioners are referring almost exclusively to open systems. They view the organization as if it were a living organism. The important point of thinking this way is to appreciate that a disturbance in one part of the system (high turnover, interpersonal conflict) often arises as a consequence of something that is happening in a different part of the system. To influence the disturbance it will be necessary to act on this other system.