

Dysfunction in Training Organisations

by Chris Robertson

This article comes out of the presentation on 'Power issues within the Training Context' at the May 1993 AHPP conference. I shall try to offer a perspective which highlights some of the central issues within a very complex topic. For, as Alix Pirani outlined at the conference, counselling and psychotherapy training organisations interface between the culture and the individual practitioner and are therefore subject to many subtle and overlapping pressures. The fact that training organisations occupy such a pivotal and powerful position is sometimes missed by those investigating therapeutic abuse. We tend to hold the individual practitioner as the one who is ultimately responsible whereas they themselves may be the victims of dysfunctional patterns from their training.

When we are trying to understand the nature of abuse, we can look in two ways: either to the past for a historical perspective such as the repetition of childhood abuse, or systemically to the wider circle in which the abuse occurs and see it as a symptom of the dysfunction of that wider circle e.g. the identified patient of a family whose symptoms express the dysfunction of the family as a whole. James Hillman has recently suggested that the language of psychopathology needs to be extroverted towards the social and cultural systems. In many ways this is not such a different message as that of Ronnie Laing's challenges to our 'sick society' or Annie Schaffer's notice of an addicted one. The point being that abuse by an individual practitioner may reflect unresolved issues within their past and they may also be symptoms of the abusive nature of the training in which they participated.

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

Elsewhere in this magazine, Ruth Green writes of her own cycle of abuse. Whereas her training was didactic and the abusing attitudes were internalised directly from her therapist/trainer, students are just as susceptible to picking up the attitudes from within the mini-culture. By the time they graduate, students have allowed this culture to pervade them, and so it is all the more pernicious because of how implicit it is. Like a fish in water, the graduate counsellor or therapist may be the last to recognise the difficulties.

The aim of this article is to bring a wider recognition of the *inevitability* of such abusive phenomena in training organisations and the impossibility of inoculation against it. The 'it can't happen here' attitude is the one that makes an organisation most susceptible to abusive patterns. Like with individual abuse, organisational abuse is mostly denied and those bringing the message to the organisation may be attacked with fury for exposing the shadow side of the organisation. This is not intended as a cynical or negative approach, but rather than being controlled by the fear of accreditational or media exposure, we might create an atmosphere in which we can recognise abuse with compassion and therefore contribute to its acknowledgement.

Paradoxically through accepting the reality of abuse in organisations trainers can *learn the humbling and salutary lessons within their organisations* rather than passing on their group pathology to the graduates. This learning could include:

- how to pay attention to the symptoms of abuse
- what training structures facilitate their recognition
- how to give a place for the painful working through of the experience
- helping potential students to know what to watch out for in a training

In the chart that follows I have used cult phenomena as a mirror for organisational dysfunction. Cult organisations may seem to be too extreme a form to act as a mirror for the subtle levels of abuse that are perpetrated in training, yet pathology shows itself more clearly in extreme forms. Having seen the characteristics that lead to abuse in the paradigm case of cults, we may more readily recognise the symptoms within our counselling and psychotherapy training organisations. I hope the reader will see from the chart that cult phenomena, rather than a full-blown cult, are prevalent in all organisations. It is the extent of the phenomena that is significant in whether or not the organisation is dysfunctional.

Research on cults (or 'New Religious Movements') seem to agree that there are four key characteristics to any group forming itself into a 'cult'. These are:

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

I have added four other characteristics, which although less generally found, have a strong psychological dimension and may be of particular interest to the reader. These are:

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

As you look at the chart you may recognise characteristics within your own training organisation (whether it is your training organisation of origin or, if you are a trainer, your present one) and you may have reactions to these recognitions. I invite you to monitor your responses while remembering that such recognition does not of itself make the organisation 'dysfunctional'. For instance most organisations have a mission and the 'Mission Statement' is very much part of the new approach to organisational transformation. Yet what is healthy to a degree may, when mixed with other characteristics, become a fanatical dogma that leads to disempowerment and abuse. While the chart analyses and separates different ingredients of what make an organisation dysfunctional, it should be remembered that it is the systemic whole that makes the organisation what it is.

CULT CHARACTERISTICS

CLOSED SYSTEM

A protective cocoon to shelter the family
Enmeshment & Incest

Outside world filtered out
Outside influences e.g. from family are discouraged

GROUP CONFORMITY

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

IDEALISATION

Charismatic leadership offers the promise of fulfilling needs
Sexual acting out

High expectations can trap leader into inflated role of supplying unmet dependency
Leader denies their own limitation and becomes inflated. No humility

SCAPEGOATING

Coheres group around the exclusion of what is 'bad'
Fear in the group of being labelled 'bad'

TRAINING STRUCTURES, SYMPTOMS

- As training expands graduates become trainers
- it is kept in the 'family'. Junior staff gain vicarious power through allegiance with founders/directors. Further training for staff is in-house, outside influence is minimised and the 'group-think' built.

Outside trainers are devalued or brought in on the periphery so that they do not create dissonance or confusion for students

- No boundaries between trainers and therapists
Therapists are graduates of the training and participate in the training and assessment of students. The students do not have a 'safe' space outside of the organisation to 'think' or voice disquiet/dissatisfaction

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

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

- Authority to give or withhold professional recognition gives trainers great power - moving the goal posts.
Subjective assessment by trainers creates dangers of negative and positive counter-transference e.g. favourites. Arbitrary judgements mean students can not self-assess and lose confidence in their own experience. They become alienated and dependent

- Powerfully transforming experiences lead newcomers to idealise trainers

- Therapeutic work evokes the inner child and leads to projection and transference onto trainers
If trainers do not acknowledge this unconscious reality, it gets played out through their unconscious fantasies of power and healing - the charlatan
Students can not afford the risk of negative parental projection with their professional investment at stake, so splitting off negative feelings or denying them
Founders/directors may not have been thoroughly trained themselves and avoids testing from outside authority

- Dissenters who are not silenced are expelled carrying the split-off feelings, the shit, with them
Resistance to group norms is labelled pathological, defensive, unprofessional and student is expected to 'work through' their deviance
Individual group members who do not 'shape up' are picked on by the trainer and group forces may be used to break down defenses. This lack of respect often rationalised as necessary therapeutically

CHARISMATIC MISSION

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

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

DENIAL OF SHADOW

Prevalent in spiritual groups seeking salvation
Light-good/dark-bad split
Abusive behaviour of leader rationalised as spiritually necessary for follower.

GROUP NARCISSISM

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

Failure to challenge superego rules and develop autonomy leads to regressive fantasies. The leader becomes God through a collapse of levels.

SECRETS

They help bind the group together - they are sworn to secrecy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Like *Sparrow Hawk* in Ursula-Le Guin's Earth Sea Trilogy, our shadow may enter in through the door of the training institute unnoticed in terms of our need for power

- Success can lead to arrogance and self-importance. The inferior, wounded side of trainers gets hidden as they attempt to live up to expectations of their new status. Double-talk is prevalent e.g. talking about vulnerability while being invulnerable

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

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

- Lack of a differentiation within the organisation leads to an inflated organisational ego which subsumes the 'Soul' Founders/directors are often the focus of projected fantasies of omnipotence which they may accept as realistic confirmations

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

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

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