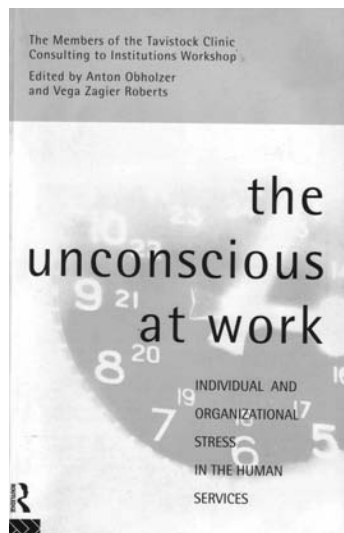# The Unconscious at Work:
Individual and Organizational Stress in the Human Services
edited by Anton Obholzer and Vega Zagier Roberts, 1994, Routledge.

Reviewed by Penny Beran

What does a collection of writings from fourteen members of the Tavistock Clinic 'Consulting to Institutions' Workshop have to offer the psychodrama community? The Tavistock Clinic is best known as a London institution that has been home since the 1940's to a group of influential practitioners experimenting with social and community applications of psychoanalytic methods. The link is that many of us work with or are members of groups that form an institution or organisation. The Tavistock authors provide other lenses through which to reflect on what is going on in these groups.

The emphasis in this book is intentionally on the "darker side of institutional functioning" - when the organisation's work does not get done, when roles are unclear, when behaviour is not rational. Their model "combines insights and theories arising from psychoanalysis, from systems and socio-technical approaches, from the work of Bion on groups, from Kleinian theory as applied to groups and institutions, and from group relations training" originating from Kurt Lewin's work and developed by Ken Rice and others (xvii, Preface). In psychodramatic work we refer to Wilfred Bion's basic assumptions. The phrase "if it's in me it's in the group" is heard often in groupwork. The Tavistock consultants show how such concepts are applied in organisational settings.

The book's four sections flow from setting the scene in Part 1, 'Conceptual Framework' to Part 2, 'Working with People in Pain', Part 3, 'Institutions in Crisis' and progressing in Part 4, 'Towards Healthier Organisations'. The 'Framework' chapters usefully cover unconscious aspects of organisational life, Bion's contributions, open systems theory and contributions from group relations training.

In Chapter 3 'The Organisation of Work', Roberts presents a case study to demonstrate elements of open system theory. She expands on the much-used concept of task and anti-task in relation to a group's basic assumption mentality. This extends our understanding of the primary task of an organisation and how members behave in response to it. For those of us that are new to psychoanalytic and socio-technical terminology, there are useful cross-references between chapters so it is easy to refresh one's grasp on definitions.

Are you a sociodramatist who asks a sub-group to declare 'the world works best when ...?' Go to Chapter 8, 'Till Death Do Us Part', on caring and uncaring for elderly people in a nursing home. Here Roberts demonstrates how organisations defend against anxiety and internal conflict. This concept is part of the basic assumptions approach. "The anxieties inherent in any work give rise to institutional defences in the form of structures and practices which serve primarily to defend staff from anxiety, rather than to promote task performance." She cites two models of care from which nurse and specialist therapists worked: namely the warehousing and the horticultural model of care. These models bring to life the different worldviews of the groups. (Imagine asking 'So, in a warehouse nursing home, the world works best when ... ?'). Not surprisingly, conflicts arose between these groups. The consultants identified what support was needed for them as well as patients and relatives to contribute to a shared purpose.

This chapter is part of the section on working with people in pain. There are enticing case studies of hospital baby units, damaged children, physically handicapped children, dying people and hospital nursing.

In thinking about my and my colleagues current and previous work roles I was drawn to Chapter 12, 'The Self Assigned Impossible Task', on why someone works in a certain field. Fundamentally, Roberts proposes that "It is the drive to effect reparation, partly conscious, but largely unconscious, that is the fundamental impetus to all creative, productive and caring activities" (p115). This sounds like social atom repair. The big difference is which theory is used to say from where creativity springs. Moreno's view was that everything we accomplish is rooted in interpersonal behaviour (Marineau 1989:100), rather than unconscious drive.

In the last section, Obholzer's chapter, 'Managing Social Anxieties in Public Sector Organizations', is one of four with case studies revealing the parallel between human psychic processes and institutional processes and offering approaches to managing the consequent anxieties. Obholzer proposes that institutions and large social systems function as containers of social anxieties. He writes in particular on health and education.

You will have heard the question 'Where is the health and hope in the system?' In the Afterword, Obholzer remarks that "useful and meaningful change is extremely hard to bring about. Why is this so, and what can we do about it?" His answer is primarily to better understand and manage the spectrum of individual and organisational anxieties.

In a wide ranging book of 200 pages, plus reference list and solid index, these Tavistock consultants complement the psychoanalytic viewpoint (about the unconscious) with consideration of conscious aspects of organisations such as structure and roles.

Moreno apparently told Freud "I start where you leave off. You analyse people's dreams. I teach them to dream again." This book proposes that "a psychoanalytically oriented consultant takes up a listening position on the boundary between conscious and unconscious meanings" (p12) presumably to offer a better interpretation of what is really going on. Could not a psychodramatically oriented consultant also take up such a listening post to assist people in organisations to dream again? •

The Unconscious at Work: Individual and Organizational Stress in the Human Services by Members of the Tavistock Clinic Consulting to Institutions Workshop, edited by Anton Obholzer and Vega Zagier Roberts, was first published in1994 by Routledge.

References:
  Marineau RF (1989), *Jacob Levy Moreno 1889-1974 Father of Psychodrama, Sociometry, and Group Psychotherapy,* Tavistock/ Routledge.