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## Preface

The presented papers form an important starting point for academic discussions and show us the diverse spectrum of interesting issues perceived from the perspective of organizational behaviours and organizational culture, enriched with examples of the interpretational possibilities offered by the psychoanalytic understanding of social phenomena. What merits special attention is the fact that half of the articles contributed to the collection present a systemic-psychodynamic approach, still relatively little known in Polish management. This approach is based on psychoanalytic theories and the concepts developed therein.

The exceptional nature of this collection consists in showing the diversity of perspectives regarding both the understanding and the empirical examination of the phenomena and processes which we observe in organizations. It contains six articles that describe from the cognitive-behavioural perspective phenomena as complex as whistleblowing (I. Świątek-Barylska, M. Opara: *Perception of whistleblowing by professionals-to-be. Results of the research*) and organizational creativity and ambidexterity in Polish enterprises (K. Bratnicka: *Creativity and performance. Testing ambidextrous hypotheses in Polish SME's context*). These two articles are based on extensive empirical studies and can form a very good groundwork for further research, and they have a great practical importance for managers, too.

The two subsequent papers present the issue of organizational culture described from the behavioural standpoint (J. van Cleff, and P. van Nispen: *Organisations, Projects and Culture*) and

from the systemic-psychodynamic perspective (L.F. Stapley: *Exploring the Meaning of Work in the Context of Organizational Culture*). Although it might seem that everything has already been said about organizational culture, it is worthwhile to consider the thought expressed by L.F. Stapley that we focus on the identification of symptoms of culture rather than understanding what it really is.

Then, the last two papers reveal the world of organizations through reference to strictly psychoanalytic constructs, such as death drive, mourning and melancholia (S. Kahn: *Eros & Thanatos: A Psychoanalytic Examination of Death in the Context of Working Life*) and the concepts of organization-in-the-mind, narcissism, unconscious, introjective identification (X. Eloquin: *The Tyrant-in-the-mind: Influences on Worker behaviour in a Post-totalitarian Organisation*). These papers, based on psychoanalytic theories, reflect upon and illuminate some of the new contours and shapes, perhaps previously not fully seen or appreciated from others perspectives.

It is my hope that this collection of six papers will form a framework for noticing, exploring, and reflecting upon the forces and processes that exist beneath the surface of our interactions with other people and our changing world. I believe that the submitted publications constitute interesting reading on modern management from the perspective of psychoanalytic and "classic" approaches to management. I hope they will become the source of many inspiring discussions and academic polemics.

Adela Barabasz



## Eros and Thanatos: a psychoanalytic examination of death in the context of working life

## Eros i Tanatos: psychoanalityczna perspektywa śmierci w kontekście miejsca pracy

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### Abstract

The unpredictability of work and the absence of lifetime institutions forces us to confront our occupational mortality. This paper grapples with the instinct towards life, Eros, and towards destruction, Thanatos,<sup>1</sup> in the context of working life. It deals with death and explores the consequences of an anticipated workplace mortality. This paper brings a fresh approach to understanding organizational endings through the application of psychoanalytic notions of death. First I present the theoretical basis of death in psychoanalysis: the death drive and mourning and melancholia. I then examine the treatment of death in organizations before briefly applying the theory to a research case based in the City of London post the 2008 financial crisis.

*Keywords:* Thanatos, death drive, mourning and melancholia, organizational endings.

### Streszczenie

Nieprzewidywalność warunków pracy oraz brak wiecznie żyjących instytucji konfrontują nas z zagadnieniem śmiertelności w kontekście wykonywanej pracy. Niniejszy artykuł odwołuje się do instynktu życia – Erosa – oraz instynktu destrukcji – Tanatosa – w odniesieniu do życia zawodowego. Artykuł przynosi świeże spojrzenie na koniec życia organizacji przez zastosowanie psychoanalitycznego konceptu śmierci. W artykule przedstawione zostały teoretyczne podstawy rozumienia śmierci w ujęciu psychoanalitycznym: popęd śmierci, żałoba i melancholia. Następnie opisano proces radzenia sobie ze śmiercią w organizacji na przykładzie londyńskiego City po kryzysie finansowym w 2008 roku.

*Słowa kluczowe:* Tanatos, popęd śmierci, żałoba i melancholia, koniec życia organizacji.

<sup>1</sup> Referring to Freud's death drive by the name of 'Thanatos', the Greek God of Death, is common, although Freud did not do so in his writings.

## Introduction

The unconscious has much to offer our understanding of key events in working life. An organizational ending is one of the most important of these events. This paper examines the lessons that can be learnt by applying Freudian ideas of death, mourning and melancholia to organizational collapse. The unconscious at work has been given attention [Fotaki, Long, Schwartz 2012; Schwartz 2010; 1989; Stein 2000; 2003; 2007; 2011; Stapley 1996; Tuckett, Taffler 2003; Halton 1994]; ISPSO<sup>2</sup> and the Tavistock tradition [Trist, Bamforth 1951; Miller 1993]. But to date there has been little under the surface analysis of organizational death, particularly research using empirical evidence. I am walking in the footsteps of De Board [1978] and Stapley [2006; 2006a]; and also Liefvooghe, Schwartz [2013], in arguing that psychoanalytic ideas can be extremely helpful in deepening our understanding of organizational phenomena.

Psychoanalytic theory has contributed to an understanding of leadership [Kets de Vries 1993; 1996], group dynamics and defences against anxiety [Bion 1961; Menzies Lyth 1960; Jacques 1995], the neurotic organization [Kets de Vries, Miller 1984] perversion and greed [Long 2008; Stein 2000; 2007] envy [Stein 2000], power and narcissism [Schwartz 1992; Stein 2003] and academia [Braddock, Lacey 2007]. The application of Freudian notions of death [Freud 1915; 1920; 1930] to an organizational context through an extended observational study is less explored.

Confronting death evokes an emotional response and the difficulty experienced in the death of an organization is mirrored in the challenge we face in examining our own mortality. The Victorian obsession with death [Jalland 2005; Curl 2004] has transferred to twentieth and twenty-first century obsessions with sex and the sexualisation of the everyday. Yet sex was also central to Victorian culture. Death is the acceptable face of Victorian culture and the explicit preoccupation of the age, with sex as the more repressed element. This has shifted to the current sexualisation of the everyday and an explicit cultural obsession with all matters sexual. Death has become the more repressed element of contemporary culture. This represents something of a reversal of the development of the Freudian drive theory that begins with the pleasure principle [Freud 1900] and moves on to propose the death drive [Freud 1920]. Contemporary obsessions with sexualisation has pushed back death into a corner and here the subject of death is brought forward, forcing us to engage with the broader topic of loss which features so strongly in working life.

## 1. Death and psychoanalysis

Psychoanalytic thought locates loss centrally: loss of the primal relationship, loss of memory and denial of loss. This sense of loss has something to offer the world of work at a time of

organizational ending as workers face the challenge of confronting death and acknowledging the limitations of life. Freud's engagement with death in his writings on transience, war and death are relevant here.

The development of the death drive, first introduced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), and revisited in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), is presented. The enigma of the death drive as both a return to nothingness and a force for destruction will be explored. I will present the ways in which death is managed through an examination of *Mourning and Melancholia*, the 1917 paper at the root of object relations thinking, the work that examines normal and pathological responses to loss.

Death is evident in much of psychoanalysis; but death also runs through other psychoanalytic thought. For example patricide features strongly in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), a collection of four essays that give us Freud's first attempt to apply his theory to anthropology. Freud demonstrates here an interest in the impact of death on those left behind and cites the example of a deceased beloved relative being transformed into a demon at the moment of death. Here primal slaughter, and the mark it has made on humanity, was put forward as one of Freud's bold notions.

## 2. The impossibility of death

In *Thoughts for the Time on War and Death*, Freud reflects that *in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality* [Freud 1915, p. 291]. Freud purports that death is not a significant psychic factor and that fear of death is secondary. Death, asserts Freud, has no place in the unconscious and when we speak of the fear of death we are really referring to something else. In the most simple of terms Freud asserts death's absence from the mind [1915; 1923; 1926]. Freud describes death as an abstract, temporal issue that has no place in the unconscious, he states that there is no death in the unconscious *todesangst*<sup>3</sup>. The key challenge of psychoanalytic engagement with death is the impossibility of accepting our mortality. As we cannot experience death, or observe our death, death is something that cannot be held in the mind and therefore cannot be contemplated. Freud was therefore quite dismissive of the importance and centrality of death in psychic thinking.

*The high-sounding phrase, 'every fear is ultimately the fear of death', has hardly any meaning, and at any rate cannot be justified.*

[Freud 1923, p. 57]

Yet Freud's relationship with death was more complex than a denunciation of the significance of the fear of death, or of death anxiety. He oscillates between an outright rejection of death as having any psychic significance to a deep engagement with the subject. The side-stepping of death in psychoanalysis is seen by some as a lacuna, literally an act of repression

<sup>2</sup> International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations [www.isps.org](http://www.isps.org).

<sup>3</sup> The German *todesangst* is translated as fear of death.

[Razinsky 2013]. Freud's assertion that there is an absence of the psychic presence of death appears flawed. Freud's own experiences of loss – his diagnosis of cancer, his son's involvement in the war, the loss of his beloved daughter and grandson – led Freud to write *fundamentally everything has lost its meaning for me* (Letter quoted in [Eissler 1978, p. 229]). Such sentiments suggest that death is at the heart of psychic life, not on the sidelines.

### 2.1. Engaging with death

Not only is death something that is hard to engage with in relation to our own mortality, it is also a general topic for hushed tones and murmured consideration. Confronting mortality persists as a delicate subject. In Western society this has been so for centuries. In the midst of the First World War, Freud encouraged us to bring death to the fore.

*Would it not be better to give death the place in reality and in our thoughts that it is due and bring out our unconscious attitude to death, which we have hitherto suppressed, a little more?*

[Freud 1916, p. 193]

Freud, however, fails to respond to his own call to engage with the subject and maintains an arms-length treatment of death, despite the preoccupation with death evident in his personal life and correspondence [Fliess 1899] (in [Masson 1985])<sup>4</sup>. In *On Transience* [1916], Freud explores the interference of anticipated death on one's ability to live and embrace life.

Here the capacity to mourn is explained as crucial to the appreciation of life itself. Our mortality allows us to value beauty and to value the moment. Life is beautiful, but life is short, appears to be the motif of this 1915 piece. This is a sentiment with which the workers caught in the financial crisis in the City in 2008 might well have concurred with.

### 2.2. Working through death

This part of the paper deals with responses to loss and ways of working through death presented in the psychoanalytic literature. Before his pronouncement of the death drive Freud explores *Mourning and Melancholia* in his 1917 essay that tackles the human response to loss. He writes of the process of loss and mourning and uses an investigation of pathological responses to loss to help us understand what is indeed normal. This piece of writing is hugely important to the development of psychoanalytic thought and introduces object relations theory. Freud sets out to clarify the difference between mourning and melancholia. What Freud referred to as melancholia is most akin to contemporary depression [Leader 2009].

## 3. Mourning and melancholia

Although states of mourning and melancholia are often triggered by the same circumstances, Freud discusses what conditions need to be present for the two states to progress along their varying paths. While some statements are based on observations, much of his writing on melancholia is conjectured, Freud continues to remind the reader of this by asking questions of his own theories throughout the essay. He extends mourning beyond the loss of a loved person to the loss of an object: *some abstraction which had taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on* [Freud 1917, p. 243]. It is the extension of loss beyond the loved person to the loss experienced at work and through work that is at the heart of this paper.

Mourning is described as a normal reaction to events and one that is carried through with the passage of time. It is not therefore associated with pathological issues. During the mourning period the person realises that the loved person or object that is lost is truly gone and turns away from reality. This turning away from reality is marked by dejection, loss of interest, inability to love and inhibition of all activities. These same symptoms are present in melancholia, however in mourning, the reality of loss and absence is eventually recognised and over time the mourner returns to their normal state. But a melancholic cannot separate from the lost object and turns inwards, complaints become 'plaints'. The melancholic turn on themselves and blame themselves, they are at fault, and they should have seen the end coming.

Melancholic self-accusations can be turned against the lost object, in the case of this paper a failed organization, with anger and outrage at the injustice. In the shattering of the object-relationship, mourning focuses on the lost object and with melancholia the focus is on the abandonment of the relationship. The melancholic is constantly seeking the lost object and trying to find where it is located. Mourning is thus described as a conscious response to something, a specific death, whereas melancholia is more to do with the unconscious, resulting from a loss that cannot be physically perceived, like love. It is worth noting that Freud makes this distinction. It is a bizarre claim that such a profound event as even so-called 'normal mourning' has no unconscious content. Melancholia is thus more puzzling because of this absence of a loss that can be observed, there also exists the additional symptom of a lowering of self-regard.

*In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.*

[Freud 1917, p. 246]

The person believes that they are inferior and despicable and cannot imagine a time when they have not been repugnant; the melancholic is comfortable in sharing the truth about their awful self. This marks melancholy as a different symptom from

<sup>4</sup>It is interesting to note that clinically, death appears to be a subject of great significance yet there is something akin to a *conspiracy of silence* [Yalom 1980, p. 55] reflected in the absence of death in clinical literature.

inferiority complexes that are buried and have associations of shame. Melancholia is like an open wound, a prolonged injury, even unending. Yet the melancholic could be described as comfortable in their position, his or her attack is focussed on the lost object rather than on him or herself.

Freud saw mourning as a process, with a beginning and an end. Volkan [2007], brings us the notion of the 'perennial mourner' – the absent person is kept perpetually alive through mental representation and linking objects – such mourners do not necessarily develop a depression – but almost freeze the mourning process and 'introject' the lost person. In corporate terms we might recognise the notion of a 'civil service man' or 'Marks & Spencer employee'. These individuals identify themselves with that organization long after their departure. Such perennial mourners might be described as suffering from melancholia, although Volkan does not acknowledge his debt to Freud.

*The disturbance of self-regard* – Freud describes the healthy response to loss, mourning, as differing in one fundamental regard to the pathological response to loss, melancholia. That difference is the lowering of self-regard and self-repulsion.

Within the organizational context of a failing business one can map such feelings of self-reproach onto those who blame themselves for the downfall of their place of work. If only I had worked harder, or won that contract, or raised my concerns or brought in more business – perhaps then the business would have survived. There are elements of narcissism in such self-reproach, a means of expanding the importance of one's own contribution to the success or failure of the entire organization. Narcissism was only introduced as a concept a few months before Freud wrote his paper, "*On narcissism: An introduction*" [1914b], but such concepts provided an important part of the stage for object relations theory of melancholia [Ogden 2012].

*Object-loss transformed into ego-loss* – the attack on self becomes interesting as the paper develops. Here Freud dissects the violent self-accusations and concludes that these attacks are not necessarily on the person themselves but that they do fit very closely the image of someone else, the image of the person who has been lost. So the accusations that the melancholic directs inwards are unconsciously attacks on the loved object that has been lost. The emotional response to the loss is outrage, disappointment and anger. So if we relate the previous self-accusations away from the person concerned, the individual working in the condemned organization, and direct them instead towards the organization itself, the attack is different.

Instead of, if only I had worked harder, or won that contract, the attack is towards the organization; if only the organization was better structured to win contracts and reward hard work we might have survived. Rather than reproaches of if only I had raised my concerns we might hear, if only the business had behaved ethically. Instead of if only I had brought in more business, the attack might be turned on the decision makers who could be accused of not producing the right product, or price plan, then the business would have survived. Blame, attack and accusation shifted from oneself to the organization as a whole, relieving the burden of one's responsibility for the success or failure of the entire organization. Yet it is vital to

remember that such mental states are not conscious and the internal voice of the individual who defines themselves as repugnant, unworthy and to blame is being driven by their unconscious and not their thinking, logical self. The melancholic never explicitly reproaches the object, but only indirectly, through their self-reproaches. An attack on the organization would therefore not be characteristic of the melancholic who would direct their reproaches inwards rather than blaming the organization.

*One unconscious part of the ego stalking another* – it is important to stress that both mourning and melancholia are applicable to situations that extend far beyond the death of a loved one or close friend. Symptoms of loss can be extended beyond the death of a human being to the loss of relationship, object or fantasy. This is the premise of this research that the work on mourning and melancholia has a contribution to the loss experienced as a result of organizational closure.

The forces of love and hate that are a feature of internal object relations are also a feature of pathological relationships such as an abusive partnership or an abused child – the experience of loving hate and hateful love. This is perhaps the most uncomfortable element to trace to organizational life where sadistic behaviour is regularly evidenced.

*The psychotic edge of mania and melancholia* – Freud provides another layer of meaning to melancholia by describing the way in which melancholia can switch to mania, whereby mania triumphs in overcoming the painful feelings which crush the melancholic. Freud uses the extended metaphor of the analyst as detective to explain the way in which melancholia can transform into mania. He describes mania and melancholia wrestling with the same unconscious complex, in melancholia the ego has succumbed and been consumed by the painful and crushing loss and in mania the pain has been pushed aside. Freud attempts to explain the exuberance and triumph experienced in mania using a vignette of a 'poor wretch' who wins a great deal of money. In winning the money the individual is relieved of every day worries and concerns. Freud also talks of the situation when after an arduous struggle one is finally crowned with success. Ogden suggests this must surely relate to his own wish to have his contribution and status recognized [Ogden 2012].

*The wish to continue living and the wish to be at one with the dead* – ambivalence is presented as an unconscious expression of unresolved feeling of love and hate, as might be seen in a healthy Oedipal experience or the torment of an obsessional neurotic [Ogden 2012]. But in the case of *Mourning and Melancholia* ambivalence is presented as a different struggle, that of a wish to be at one with the living and a wish to be at one with the dead.

How can this concept of ambivalence be directed towards one's experience of working in a dying organization? Here there is strong evidence that identity attachment and evaluation of self is strongly tied to working identity. Gratitude for the career opportunity and exposure may be mixed with resentment of loss of future and taint associated with working in an organization closing down [Bell, Taylor 2011; Kahn, Liefoghe 2014]. Some question the validity of extending clinical accounts

of melancholia to social theory [Frosh 2012]. Yet there are signs that this use of psychoanalysis, for example in applying the metaphor of post-colonial melancholy, is helpful and powerful [Khanna 2004], or in using a psychoanalytic lens to understand the desire for whiteness [Seshadri-Crooks 2000].

Melancholia is described as deriving some of its characteristics from mourning and the rest from narcissism. The loss of the loved object turns into pathological mourning, forcing self-reproach and self-blame for the loss of the loved object.

The pleasure of self-torment evidenced in melancholia suggest the satisfaction of tendencies towards sadism and hatred. The hatred is applied to the lost person and then turned back on against the melancholic.

#### 4. Nothingness versus destruction

*If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that ‘the aim of all life is death’ and, looking backwards, that ‘inanimate things existed before living ones’.*

[Freud 1920, p. 38]

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], we are introduced to an alternative force. Freud refers us to the compulsion in the mind to repeat as a greater drive than that of the pleasure principle. This is most evident in the observation of a child’s play where we are brought the example of the little boy (reportedly Freud’s grandson, Ernst) who plays a game of disappearance and return, of ‘fort’ and ‘da’.<sup>5</sup> This child manages the departure of his mother with a game that repeats disappearance and return, with the pain of loss rewarded by the joy of return. Freud offers us as the universal endeavour of all living creatures, a return to the *quiescence of the inorganic world* [1920, p. 62]. The greatest pleasure of man, the sexual act, Freud, and later Lacan, associated with the extinction of a *highly intensified excitation* [Freud 1920, p. 62]. Freud therefore did not dismiss the importance of sexual drives but introduced another drive, one that takes away all tension, pain and unwanted stimulation – a drive towards a state of death. The potential for self-destruction within humankind has given the death drive something of a controversial nature. It has been warmly embraced by some psychoanalysts, notably Klein [1940], although she imbues it with a different meaning.

#### 5. The death drive

*Our views have from the very first been dualistic, and to-day they are even more definitely dualistic than before – now that we describe the opposition as being, not between ego-instincts and sexual instincts but between life instincts and death instincts.*

[Freud 1920, p. 53]

If Freud’s first point of reference is the Oedipus complex, then the second is the death drive [Weatherill 1999; Carr, Lapp 2006]. The death drive is part of Freud’s second topographical model. The first topography postulated the dynamic unconscious world with associated drives and anxieties based on infantile sexual experience. Sexual drives remained important to Freud but his second topography included the development of the death drive – a drive that compels living creatures to strive for a lifeless, inorganic state. Thanatos, or the death instinct, as the death drive is also commonly referred to [Rycroft 1995], is not an aggressive or destructive instinct against others, rather it turns that instinct in on itself so rather than wishing to annihilate the other, the drive is to annihilate oneself and to return to a state of nothing, to literally dissolve.

However, Freud does not speak of Thanatos in substantive terms, he was wary of it and did not see it as having its own energy. Eros (love) takes the death drive into itself and renders it invisible. The death drive is a return to life’s purest form. Freud introduced the concept of the death drive as a negative concept in opposition to the drive for life. So whilst Eros is paired with the energy of ‘libido’, Thanatos has no such equivalent energy beyond a suggested name ‘mortido destrudo’ [Rycroft 1995].

Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], shares the idea that death is no longer an easy option. External influences make death more difficult and an organism has to make many detours and circuitous routes before reaching death. Dollimore describes *life itself is only a detour to death* [2001, p. 186]. This captures what is difficult to grasp in understanding the death drive. Freud describes a falling back into complete satisfaction, a return to the fundamental of living organisms to death. It is the nature of social and psychic life that rather than falling back we are compelled to move forward to as the ‘backward path’ is blocked by repressions on which society is built. The most fundamental repression in Freudian terms is the blocking of desire – the containment of libidinal freedom is the basis of civilization.

Freud is tentative initially in his presentation of the death drive but he pursues the notion of binding and unbinding and re-examines the origins of psychic pain. In *Civilization and its Discontents* [1930], Freud writes of dissolution, of dissolving life back to a pre organic state, literally to *dissolve life back into primeval, inorganic state* [Freud 1930, p. 310]. Freud continues to offer dissolution as a key part of this topography but his presentation of the death drive in *Civilization and its Discontents* also presents the more aggressive and sadistic elements of the death drive.

Freud describes human beings as constantly inclined towards aggression to one another, that there is a great struggle against self-destruction, that society is literally and perpetually threatened with disintegration. The struggle against self-destruction, a phenomenon much in evidence in psychology [Frosh 2012], marries well with Freud’s notion of a death drive.

<sup>5</sup> The child’s drawn out ‘oooo’ is interpreted by as the German word ‘fort’ meaning gone, ‘da’ means there, therefore a game of disappearance and return.

As noted earlier, Freud states that there is no death in the unconscious, yet he moves to make the death instinct central to his thinking. Freud's preoccupation with an internal force of dissolution captured in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* develops in *Civilization and its Discontents* [1930], to a destructive force directed towards the world in general. In Freud's return to the death drive this writing occurred at a time when the ravages of the First World War could be understood and that the violence and aggression of war was very much on the surface. The clash of desire and civilization leads Freud to the notion that there is something impossible about the fulfilment of human desire [Dollimore 2001].

The death drive was characterised by a drive towards an inorganic state, a state of nothingness or nirvana and offers a contrast to his more willingly received life drive linked to sexual urges and desires for satisfaction. Cited as the most controversial of Freud's contributions [Akhtar 2011], it caused considerable controversy. Libido and aggression here are on an equal footing. Jones [1961], in his biography of Freud acknowledges the limited objective support the drive theory received. Winnicott too has no place for death drive yet there is a place for aggression acknowledged; in Winnicott's thought this is seen in line with 'synonymous with activity' [1975, p. 204] (in [Frosh 2012]). Freud's drive theory pits sexual urges against ego preservation urges and death drives against those committed to life [Frosh 2012]. Psychoanalytic ideas of death are now applied to organizations.

## 6. Application of Freud to organizational death

I have examined the way in which psychoanalysis examines death and now I will look at the way in which Freud's work on death can be utilised in examining organizational death. Based

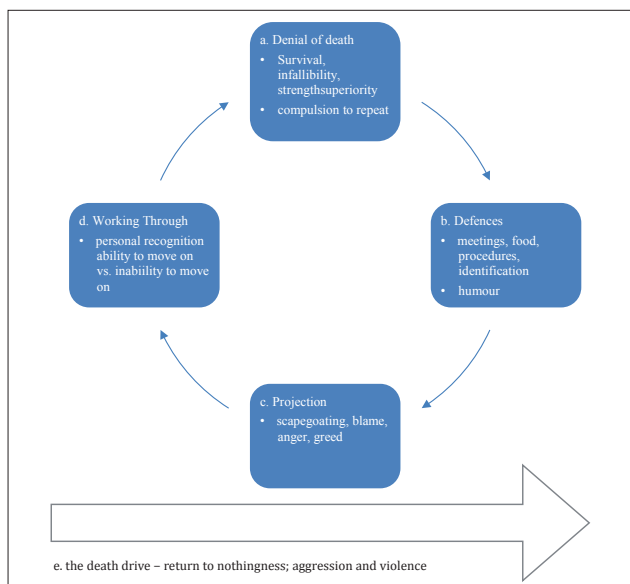


Figure 1. Application of Freud's work on death to organizations

Source: Freud S., 1915, *Timely Reflections on War and Death*, Standard Edition 14:275-300, Hogarth Press, London; Freud S., 1917, *Mourning and Melancholia*, Standard Edition 14, Hogarth Press, London also Penguin Modern Classics, London; Freud S., 1930, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Standard Edition 21, Hogarth Press, London.

on the data analysis I have developed the following figure to represent how Freud's work can be applied to organizational death. Adopting a position of denial, defences against death, projection and working through the relevance of Freudian work on death to organizational endings is demonstrated.

## 7. Death and organizations

We are experiencing a vulnerability of working life where increasingly organizational collapse is a feature of our everyday experience [Samuel 2010; Cederstrom, Fleming 2012; Comfort 2013]. Endings can be experienced as a profound source of loss and suffering [Driver 2007, 2009; Cunningham 1997; Harris, Sutton 1986]. The collapse of large financial institutions, corporate giants, high street stores as well as numerous small and medium sized enterprises means that organizational death is a feature of working life in this early part of the twenty first century.

Organizational death has received some attention in terms of pathology and investigation as to why the organization has failed through a diagnostic model of failure encompassing the various disorders and illnesses that might affect the life chances of an organization. The focus on the downfall and disappearance of organizations usefully highlights the tendency for organizational success to draw more attention and interest than organizational failure [Samuel 2010]. Organizational decline and death is receiving attention, for example focusing on models for understanding organizational failure [Mellahi, Wilkinson 2004].

Loss and grief are part of everyday experience, an experience that is felt no less keenly in the workplace. These responses to loss are experienced in organizations when an organization ceases to exist, or a department shuts down, or when a leader dies. In attempting to understand loss and grief, different frameworks and models have been developed, now these topics will be given attention.

Kubler-Ross is perhaps the most commonly referred to creator of a model of grief. *On Death and Dying* [1969], was inspired by her work with terminally ill patients. Her contribution was significant and led to changes in the care of the terminally ill in the United States of America and beyond. The influence of psychoanalytic theory on the development of this model is clear.

Kubler-Ross presents a five stage model of grief that a person and/or their survivors will experience when confronted with impending death. This hypothesis offers stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance; these might be experienced in no particular order and not necessarily all the stages will be experienced as each loss will be unique. Kubler-Ross also tackles the issue of resistance to the subject of death and describes the struggle of hospital staff to engage with the subject of death and dying. She notes that those with experience of loss employed fewer defence mechanisms and were more readily able to face death as a reality. She also distinguishes between doctors and nurses and identifies nurses to be the more comfortable engaging with the topic. She cites Cicely Saunders, founder of the modern hospice movement, a nurse first, then medical social worker and then physician, as expert



at dealing with matters of death with comfort; *..since she does not need denial she is unlikely to meet much denial in her patients* [Kubler-Ross 1969, p. 248].

Kubler-Ross describes how she guides medical staff through fright, helplessness and feelings of impotence towards a more familiar and accepting attitude towards death. Some application of her work has been made to organizational life in the field of organizational change [Zell 2003; Elrod, Tippett 2002]. Zell draws parallels with Kubler-Ross's stages of death and dying in a study of a large public university to explain individual and group level responses to change. Using data gathered as part of a change management programme Zell [2003], identified that professors in the physics department responded to change in ways that resembled the stages of death and dying identified by Kubler-Ross. Zell reports that, like the terminally ill, the faculty went through periods of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and ultimately acceptance.

Elrod and Tippett [2002], use bereavement theory as part of their review of the human response to change and transition, of which loss and death is central. They title their paper *The "death valley" of change* and credit Kubler-Ross as one of the first writers to succinctly develop a stage process to understanding change. However they prioritise Lewin's stage model of change as most influential, incorporating the three phases of unfreezing, moving and freezing [1952]. They identify as most challenging the intermediary stage, in both the Lewin and the Kubler-Ross model, resulting in a decrease in capabilities.

The Kubler-Ross model of grief has been applied widely and beyond responses to individual experiences of death. Some, however, question Kubler-Ross as offering a model of dying universally applicable and resist the categorisation of the mourning experience [Terry 2012; Douglas 2004]. There is also resistance to the holistic description of the mourning process, one that has a beginning and an end, the question is raised as to what propels individuals through the stages and prevents them from being stuck in an endless loop of grief [Zell 2003; Archer 1999]. Zell does not refer to melancholia, but melancholia is akin to what she describes as the *stuckness* in grief.

Ritual processes associated with organizational closure have been highlighted by Harris and Sutton [1986]. Ritual acts, such as parting ceremonies, are explained as important in allowing employees to separate from the organization and the demands associated with organizational death. Sutton [1987], develops this thinking, drawing attention to the social aspect of members and previous members coming together to bid the organization farewell. A model of understanding organization endings is also being developed at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, where the type of organizational ending is being linked to the type of end of life decisions and options made, for example palliative care with an accepted care plan, assisted death with a joint decision to end life or even ritual killing where the end might be perceived as a gift to others [Arman 2012].

The life cycle model of organizations is supported by a number of proponents [Galbraith 1982], who see organizations evolve

in a variety of different stages. These scholars do not necessarily agree on what those stages might be, yet do concur that organizations move through a cycle of birth, growth, maturity, ageing and death. This is seen as akin to the biological life cycle [Daft 2004]. Organizational pathology is given further attention by Samuel [2010], who applies the biological metaphor of a sick organization.

*Deficiencies and malfunctions, which endanger the strength and survival of organizations, are treated here as pathologies. Organizational crime, corruption, and other related phenomena are similarly dealt with in this context, as representing abnormalities that threaten the existence of organizations.*

[Samuel 2010, p. 2]

Closedown or *organizational death* [Sutton 1987], has also invoked the biological metaphor. Sutton explores the transition to death through research designed to develop a model that could be translated to other organizational deaths. His work concentrated on unambiguous organizational death, that is organizations that were defunct and their function or task no longer in operation [Sutton 1987]. In writing about the process of organizational death, Sutton treats biological death and organizational death as one and the same. Yet when a biological system dies so do all of its components, with the exception of organ transplantation, and this is not true for organizations with human members. Sutton argues that terms such as closing or termination do not sufficiently or satisfactorily convey the loss of an organization to displaced members – it is perhaps more similar to the loss of a friend or relative [Harris, Sutton 1986].

Hasanen [2010], points out that in biological death all components of the system die whereas in organizational death the human component lives on. The contrast between failure and death is brought out by Samuel [2010]. He notes that whilst failure is reversible, for example in a turnaround or management buyout situations, death is not reversible.

These models provide different frameworks in which to examine loss and mourning. The paper now turns to grieving workers, the destructiveness of organizations and the loss of a leader and departing employees.

## 8. Grief and loss in the workplace

With the concept of the *perennial mourner* [Volkan 2007], the absent person is kept perpetually alive through mental representation and linking objects. Such mourners do not necessarily develop a depression, but almost freeze the mourning process and 'introject' the lost person. The impact of grieving workers on organizational well-being is explored through institutional responses to grieving employees largely from the perspective of the employee's loss of a loved one [Hazen 2008]. She presents an analysis of the economic cost of grieving employees. In cases of shared trauma Hazen identifies work as part of the healing process, for example the Cantor Fitzgerald survivors of 9/11 [Barbash 2006].

The concept of mourning applied to those experiencing the loss of work and organization is also tackled by Gabriel [2012].

Organizational mortality presents an opportunity for the examination of systemic and individual loss. Gabriel offers psychoanalytic insights into dramatic organizational change applying a theory of organizational miasma. The infected and contagious pollution of miasma powerfully evokes the drama of organizational life going through change, closure and reinvention. The below the surface descriptions capture the essence of working within the brutal environment of a corporate rebrand and reinvention. Gabriel recognizes the place for melancholia during corporate chaos and loss, yet his examinations of unfinished and unexplored mourning creates this dark environment, the miasma, absent in the work of this research. Collective grief in work organizations is also given some attention in the case of major organizational change [Zell 2003], or plant closure [Harris, Sutton 1986].

Zell describes organizational change as a process of death, dying and rebirth. Using the study of a Department of Physics (as described earlier in relation to Kubler-Ross) she also draws on psychoanalytic theory to support her argument citing *Mourning and Melancholia* [Freud 1917] in an argument that supports the value of psychoanalysis as a vehicle to understand organisational death. She acknowledges, as this text does, that the professionals in her study are not dying, but that part of them is dying and that this loss has to be mourned.

*For the physicists, their object of love was multifaceted and included the past prestige and stature of their field, the freedom to pursue their research specialities, and to teach the courses they desired.*

[Zell 2003, p. 79]

Harris and Sutton look at parting ceremonies in six closing organizations and develop a theory that the parties and celebrations associated with the closure are a way in which the managers can influence the course of the organization's demise and a way of members coping with the closure. The following invitation to a wake for a dying organization illustrates management efforts.

*The wake is to be an occasion to remember the vigor and charm of the departing spirit. We are interested in recalling and sharing memories of the place with those who were its friends and who may have benefitted from their association with it over the years. If you cannot attend, please consider sending a message perhaps containing an anecdote you remember with pleasure.*

[Harris, Sutton 1986, p. 5]

Parting ceremonies, be they picnics, parties or social gatherings, were dominant in six of the eight closures studied and appear to be prevalent in organizational death [Harris, Sutton 1986, p. 6]. Closure is emotionally charged, it involves the loss of a social arena and of relationships. These ceremonies serve a function for the displaced member, *the members are at once providers and receivers of support and coping strategies* [Harris, Sutton 1986, p. 11]. Despite the range of celebrations evidenced (wake, lunch, big party, picnic) all shared common elements such as the expression of both sadness and anger; the

consumption of food and alcohol; the sharing of stories and taking of photographs. These common themes, argue Harris and Sutton, are in response to the demands placed on its members of organizational death and a way of bringing some control to the situation.

The emotional response to organizational death is examined by Cunningham [1997]. The participant observation study assumes that those affected by an organization's death, its members, but also its clients and associated organizations, experience similar feelings as when a person dies. The paper opens with two examples of displaced individuals who are affected by organizational death and, in their inability to cope, seek refuge in their organization's generous disability programme. His premise is that closure is a traumatic experience and some are better equipped to cope with disconnection and reconnection to another role. He argues, through his long term study of a dying community club, that the trauma of the disconnection encourages a dependence on leaders and that those who take longest to accept the inevitability of the end were those unwilling to express their feelings and concerns.

Catastrophic anxiety at the thought of loss and ending can lead to anger and attack [Salzberger-Wittenberg 2013]. It is painful to part and that parting is made more manageable by providing a space to address and face that ending. This issue was addressed for trainees at the Tavistock Clinic by the introduction of an annual instituted ending event, where feelings about endings could be shared [Salzberger-Wittenberg 2013]. Members of staff can also experience difficulties in adjusting to a new leader, particularly in the case of a dominant or charismatic leader. The loss of a controlling leader, committed to the team and generating great loyalty and involvement in her dying days led to staff struggles – staff had become used to depending on their previous leader to make decisions and they struggled to cope with their independence [Hyde, Thomas 2003]. In an anxious time fears of persecution may be projected on to others in order to retain the safety of the group [Hinshelwood, Skogstad 2000].

Replacement of a leader is therefore a loss keenly felt and an attachment not easily replaced despite the logic or merits of such a replacement. In the case of Hyde and Thomas's health service study the leader had died and therefore replacement by another individual was inevitable. We turn to Freud to explain this reluctance to give up on a loss, the reality of the demand to forego any attachment to the object that no longer exists.

*This demand arouses understandable opposition – it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them.*

[Freud 1917, p. 244]

Such loss can fuel fantasies for those who remain and evoke conflicting emotions of release or rejection; renegotiation of work practices will need to be established with the newly appointed leader and finally fantasies held about the leader as

omnipotent will be affected [Hyde, Thomas 2003]. In a slow closedown situation that loss is repeated again and again. The organization faces ultimate demise but in the run up to that date of closure multiple losses occur with colleagues taking redundancy, finding new jobs or moving on in other ways. Employees might also experience a sense of *manic triumph* [Speck 1994] in that they have survived whilst others have not.

Stokes [1994], describes the role of a consultancy process conducted by a nurse who had organised bereavement training for nurses, only to reveal her own intention to leave the department, offering a 'bereavement' which could be discussed and learnt from. Bereavement can therefore be experienced at work through the loss of a leader but also through the departure of a member of staff.

## 9. Mergers and downsizing

The experience of downsizing can be a series of endings for those experiencing a rationalization process. Describing the closure of a department as the ending of an organizational function as downsizing, a euphemism used as a means to sanitize the impact of organizational death on its members, in a sense to avoid the potential pain of the loss of those affected (Stein 1998).

The paring down of function or role can lead to a division in responsibility that brings with it survivors and victims. Loss of trust and additional stress in a downsizing operation can be experienced as grief [Kets de Vries, Balazs 1997]. Kets de Vries and Balazs [1997], explore the impact of downsizing on the inner world of the stakeholders affected.

Their study looks at the roles of different players in the downsizing process such as victims and survivors and places special attention on the role of 'executioner', the senior employees with the responsibility to execute the downsizing process. This links to Arman's identification of murder in organizational death [2012]. These individuals often have to abandon their personal values and belief system, the very values that led them to senior roles, in order to execute the downsizing plans. They do this by becoming detached and focussing on the organizational targets [Kets de Vries, Balazs 1997]. However such efforts lead to further stress with reactions amongst staff including depression, substance abuse, hostility and absenteeism [Leana, Feldman 1988; Noer 1993]. Those responsible for the removal of employees adopted defensive patterns such as isolation, aggression and self-aggrandizement, scapegoating of the victims, dissociation and depression. By looking at the psychological effects of those conducting the downsizing they offer a way of reframing downsizing to make it a less destructive process. This study provides a good example of the way in which the experience of organizational loss can be understood psychoanalytically from a number of differing stakeholders.

Loss of control in a buy-out or a merger is considered to be a death by some [De Gooijer 2009].

*When two organizations combine, at least one ceases to exist and this must be considered a death. If a merger*

*involves a dominant partner then the subordinate organization dies.*

[Carroll, Delacroix 1982, p. 180]

Closedown or closure has been adopted in some management literature to alleviate the confusion of other restructuring or change efforts [Hansson, Wigblad 2006, Wigblad 2006; Bergman, Wigblad 1999]. Kelly and Riach's 2012 study in the UK financial services sector challenges this with a mythical analysis invoking Frankenstein as a metaphor for reanimating the dying organization. Persistent failure manifests itself in organizational damage to itself and to stakeholders, these organizations may 'bleed' and ultimately face their demise.

## 10. Applying psychoanalytic theory to a dying organization

I now apply the ideas discussed in the paper to an organization. The organization I refer to here was a financial institution that operated in the City but was headquartered outside of the UK. The institution was part of the financial boom and collapsed in 2008. It was taken over by a government body (unlike Lehman Brothers) but this rescue was merely palliative, the government intervention acted as an interim support, with the prospect of the organization facing its own certain demise.

The research was empirically led and carried out at a critical time of change and recalibration in the financial capital of the City of London. The heady days of excess, profit and extreme opportunity were over and the organization at the heart of the research could certainly be described as a casualty of the financial crisis of 2008. However as late as 2006, it was notable as an international darling of the financial markets. Whether the organization was an innocent casualty or the perpetrator of its own demise is not deliberated here.

Distance is a useful tool in contemplating death. Close attachment and involvement in death can make thinking very difficult. This applies equally to organizational death, endings and closure. When an organization in which one works faces its end, the loss is deeply entangled in everyday existence. Therefore the ending is inevitably emotional and complex. As an outsider observing such endings one's stance is on the edge, being outside the organization provides a privileged platform from which to observe without getting caught up in the organizational defences, or if one is caught up, then to be able to reflect on this. This distance equally applies to those working with an organization facing closure and such insight can help those who are part of the organizational closure to move forward and work through their loss.

During an intense period of eighteen months I used a combination of psychoanalytic observation and in-depth interviews to examine a bank situated in the heart of the City of London, a casualty of the financial crisis.

Psychoanalytic observation has its foundations in infant observation and these principles are applied to an organizational setting. These features include: the capacity of free-floating attention of the observer; the neutral positioning of the observer; the transference and countertransference between the

key players; regular weekly observation slots of an-hour long duration; the non-participation of the observer and detailed and literal recordings of the observation.

Psychoanalytic observation was not initially developed as a method of research. Its primary purpose was the training and development of the skills and sensibilities of psychotherapists or other health professionals dedicated to working with children [Rustin 2006]. The ethnographic qualities of infant observation were identified by Rustin (in *Closely Observed Infants*, [Miller et al. 1989]), and the proposal for a research agenda for infant observation was born. However observation is employed differently in an organizational setting. Rather than its goal being a training exercise, its goal is research based, aiming to gather data that is unencumbered by role or participation.

My findings showed that within the bank the ending was experienced differently by employees and teams; the split was akin to the response of mourning or melancholia. The employees who were recruited with the expectation of a lifetime career are contrasted with the shorter term employees who joined the organization in the knowledge that the bank was in a slow closure process. Unlike longer term employees, these recruits were fully aware that their time in the organisation was limited from the outset and that their employment was unlikely to result in a long term future. These groups offered a helpful distinction in dealing with the loss of the organization. There was also a polarised response to the crushing reality. Leaders were blamed or idealized, organizational tactics justified as not understood by those outside. The insider and outsiders, liars and truth tellers, innovators and bureaucrats were divided and blamed.

The research demonstrated that an organization is made up of many individuals who experience their loss in different ways, so an operating system may contain individuals who are mournful and others who are melancholic. This is a mirror representation of family life where members of the same family experience their loss differently based on a number of factors including psychical make up, valance, relationship to the deceased etc. In this bank this was the case, although the greater volume of data spoke to a melancholic response. Members of the organization were split in their response to their ending. In melancholia there is an inability to replace the lost object with any new object of love; if we apply this to organizational death, the object becomes the impossibility of the prospect or actuality of another place of work. It further shows links between the melancholic self-reproach and the sense of responsibility and blame directed at the self for the organization's downfall. The thesis thus illustrates the way in which *what starts outside comes in* [Frosh 2012, p. 132] and how *the shadow of the object fell upon the ego* [Freud 1917, p. 249].

The way in which people mourn the loss of organizational life was contrasted with a melancholic response where the defences against death are evidenced and presented in emergent themes of mania, denial, greed and splitting. What emerged from the research was an organization of greed and gorging contrasted with an organization of delusion and denial. An or-

ganization that was loyal to a charismatic leader yet also accepting of the end, an organization working through.

The death drive can be expressed in two very different ways, firstly as a desire to return to nothingness, to an inorganic state, presented first in Freud's engagement with death in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], and secondly as a more violent drive to destruction, presented in Freud's later analysis of *Civilization and its Discontents* [1930]. The City displayed more of the former than the latter. The City buried its head, returned to the womb and rocked itself into a numbing state of denial. The suicides within Interbank and the City can be understood in the light of the wish to return to a state of nothingness [Cederstrom, Fleming 2012; Cullen 2014]. As identified for Freud, suicide represented the killing off of the unwanted self [1912]. There were other signs that the City expressed the characteristics of the death drive associated with a return to nothingness rather than the more aggressive, sadistic elements of the death drive evidence in the headquarters of the bank. The City of London based bank immersed itself in numbing procedures and bureaucracy. Planning, meetings and attention to process and quality control allowed this organization to bury its head and itself firmly in the ground.

My analysis showed that organizational death elicits both a mournful and melancholic response compatible with Freud's analysis of object loss. The pain of organizational death evoked defence mechanisms that included mania, denial, greed and splitting. I identified the relevance of the death drive, manifested in both its expressions: as a return to nothingness and in its sadistic and aggressive form. The City of London was contrasted with the international headquarters of the bank at the heart of the research.

## Concluding thoughts

This paper first introduced psychoanalytic notions of death through an examination of *mourning and melancholia* and the *death drive*, these notions have been applied to the loss and pain of a closing workplace. Other examinations of endings at work have been explored and the notion of loss at work has been examined. I then used this theory to highlight how psychoanalysis can help to understand the experience of organizational closure through reference to a piece of research in a City of London bank facing closure during the financial crisis that began in 2008.

We lack convention in dealing with the death of a workplace. Yet we come to work with our whole selves, our mind, body and soul. Inevitably loss of a central part of our identity, our work, will impact on our emotional state. Psychoanalysis and its examination of loss, of mourning and of melancholia, can help to frame that loss and to understand better the experience of death of work.

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