

# **An orientation to the systems psychodynamic approach to diversity**

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The Robben Island Diversity Experience presents a novel approach to understanding diversity and the effect it has on organizations and society as a whole. The literature review conducted in this study explores the use of the psychodynamic approach in studying diversity. It starts off by presenting an orientation to diversity within the context of contemporary society. This is followed by a more in-depth discussion of (1) diversity and (2) the psychodynamic approach to organizational behavior. The literature review is concluded by integrating these two constructs and reviewing the relevancy of the psychodynamic approach to diversity.

## **1. ORIENTATION**

Internationally organisations have increasingly been confronted with diversity-related issues (Cox, 1993; Gilbert & Ivancevich, 2001; Hostager & De Meusse, 2002). The political, technological and socio-economic changes that have taken place in the last few decades have resulted in a more diverse workforce as growing numbers of women, immigrants, disabled people, older workers, people from different cultures, and other minorities have entered the labour market (Ashkanasy, HÅrtel & Daus, 2002; Ivancevich & Gilbert, 2000; Jackson, 1992; Lorbiecki, 2001; Ruderman, Hughes-James & Jackson, 1996). In contrast to fleeting trends that come and go, diversity seems to be here to stay, and with massive population movements the world over, it is bound to increase rather than decrease (Chidester, Stonier & Tobler, 1999; Chmiel, 2000).

In the South African context, DIVERSITY can indeed be written in capital letters. The country developed against the backdrop of differentiation, segregation, and discrimination (Bekker & Carlton, 1996; Eades, 1999). It has only been since the 1994 political transition that strategies have shifted from segregation and exclusion to the inclusion of all people and a celebration of the diversity this country has to offer (Beck, 2000; Charlton & Van Niekerk, 1994). Although the post-1994 changes have propelled the country from an apartheid regime towards the dream of becoming a rainbow nation, the road to reconstructing the South African society has been far from smooth (Hunt & Lascaris, 1998; Thompson, 2001).

Diversity has proved to be a double-edged sword because it is both an opportunity as well as a threat (Cavaleros, Van Vuuren & Visser, 2002; Newell, 2002). Organisations realised that diversity in itself does not lead to a competitive advantage, instead it is more likely to result in frustration, misunderstandings, unhealthy conflict, and an increase in turnover if it is not properly managed (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Van Eron, 1995). Thus the diversity sword, if not skillfully wielded, can

have major cost implications for organisations in terms of production, employee absenteeism, inefficient communication, poor utilisation of resources, low morale, and industrial.

On the upside, organisations can also reap huge benefits and even gain a competitive advantage if diversity is effectively managed (Cavaleros et al, 2002; Laubscher, 2001). Through proper management of diversity, organisations gain access to a larger pool of knowledge, skills and abilities. It can also lead to intercultural cooperation, employee satisfaction, higher morale, increased employee commitment and a reduction of discrimination-related industrial action (Carnevale & Stone, 1994; Gilbert & Ivancevich, 2001; Sadri & Tran, 2002; Selden & Selden, 2001).

Most organisations seem to realise that diversity has become an unescapable reality that has to be confronted, indeed exploited, in order to survive in this "brave new world" (Arredondo, 1996; Steyn & Motshabi, 1996; Susser & Patterson, 2001). This realisation prompted organisations to implement a variety of diversity initiatives (Cox & Beale, 1997; Hayles & Russel, 1997; Prasad, Mills, Elmes & Prasad, 1997). Because of the need to incorporate diversity into organisational functioning, the diversity training and consulting industry expanded dramatically with consultants everywhere jumping on the diversity bandwagon (Chmiel, 2000; Norton & Fox, 1997; Selden & Selden, 2001). In this regard, Van der Westhuizen (2001) cautioned that organisations should be wary, since many of these diversity-related initiatives and training programmes lack academic rigour. The fact that these initiatives can easily do more harm than good, emphasises the need for well-grounded and researched diversity initiatives (Cavaleros et al, 2002; Flynn, 1998; Newell, 2002).

Current approaches to diversity as described by Van der Westhuizen (2001) tend to focus more on mobilising wider organisational processes, than on achieving attitudinal- and behavioural change at an individual level. This process usually necessitates structural change, which in South Africa, typically includes the implementation of employment equity, equal opportunity, and affirmative action policies resulting in strategic positions being filled by minority appointments (Charlton & Van Niekerk, 1994; Laubscher, 2001; Strydom & Erwee, 1998). In addition to this revision of recruitment, appointment and promotional policies are also formulated to ensure a more inclusive and equitable organisation (Carnevale & Stone, 1994; Leach, George, Jackson, & Labella, 1995). The focus of diversity training programmes is mostly on facilitating diversity awareness, and ensuring that nondiscriminatory policies are communicated and understood (Eades, 1999; Thomas, 1996; Van der Westhuizen, 2001).

These diversity interventions are usually based on a behaviouristic and socio-cognitive approach. The training programmes are typically presented in a mechanistic, instructional and "telling style", extending knowledge and content about the different ways in which people perceive and approach life (Cilliers & May, 2002). Members are informed of the *do's and don'ts* of diversity. The underlying assumption of this mechanistic approach to diversity seems to be that members can

be trained and that once they have done the training they can be certified as being able to do diversity (Cilliers & May, 2002). The focus is thus on dealing with diversity at a hand (behavioural) and head (cognitive) level with little attention being focussed on the heart (emotional / affective) level (Groenewald, 1996; Hayles & Russell, 1997).

Current diversity initiatives mainly use obvious, mechanical and socio-cognitive approaches to address diversity-related issues. Excluded from these approaches is the systems psychodynamic stance with its focus on the unconscious and irrational forces which inform change and development (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994).

According to Human (1996b), the more rational and cognitive approaches to diversity often fail because of an inadequate understanding of the concept of diversity and its unconscious behavioural dynamics. In dealing with diversity, the affective level with its focus on needs, fears, attitudes and anxieties is greatly neglected (Groenewald, 1996; Hayles & Russel, 1997). The systems psychodynamic stance accepts that traditional talk and chalk training approaches do little more than share knowledge and enhance dependency. According to this stance individual and organisational change and growth occur only through true social learning in an experiential design (Cilliers & May, 2002). It can thus be argued that organisations only study the tip of the diversity iceberg if the covert and unconscious social political issues such as resistance, denial, splitting, projections and projective identifications are neglected (Cilliers & May, 2002; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994). True understanding and awareness develop when organisations take into consideration both the rational and the irrational forces, conscious as well as unconscious processes, and overt as well as covert behavioural dynamics (Czander, 1993; Kets De Vries & Balazs, 1998).

The need is therefore to attain a deeper understanding of diversity and the underlying forces that impact on the way diversity is perceived, experienced and acted upon. In this quest, the systems psychodynamic stance offers the possibility of attaining a deeper learning and understanding of diversity and its accompanying dynamics.

## **THE SYSTEMS PSYCHODYNAMIC PARADIGM PERSPECTIVE**

The systems psychodynamic paradigm reflects the gradual development and application of contributions from psychoanalyses and open systems theory in order to provide a conceptual framework for understanding organisational behaviour (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994; Rutan & Stone, 1993). The systems psychodynamic paradigm started with Dr Eric Miller's work and the development of a learning-from-experience model of education about group and organisational life (Cilliers, 2002). Miller and Rice's (1967) publication, *Systems of organisations*, was the first

attempt to integrate the strands of theory and insight of this interdisciplinary field. The growing nature of this paradigm ensures that its boundaries are continuously being refined and redefined (Cilliers, 2002).

The systems psychodynamic paradigm does not focus on individual behaviour per se, but rather the systemic group and organisational behaviour influencing various systems, of which the individual is but one. The central tenet of this paradigm is contained in the conjunction of the two terms 'systems' and 'psychodynamic' (French & Vince, 1999; Stapley, 1996). It simultaneously works from 'the inside out' and 'the outside in' with both perspectives contributing to a holistic understanding of organisations. The following sections provide a brief overview of psychoanalysis, object relations theory, and systems theory as the conceptual origins of the systems psychodynamic paradigm.

#### *a Psychoanalysis*

Psychoanalytic theory, as developed by Freud (1921; 1923; 1930), poses a basic framework through which deeper understanding of the unconscious and irrational forces that impact on human behaviour can be attained. Psychoanalysis centres around the realisation that there are hidden aspects of human mental life which, while remaining hidden, nevertheless influence conscious processes and/or behaviour (Czander, 1993; Halton, 1994). From this perspective flows the belief that behaviour cannot be ascribed to chance, and a person's behaviour therefore reflects his/her unconscious (Albertyn, 1999). Hence the aim of psychoanalysis is to make the unconscious conscious; and to help people gain greater understanding of the unconscious and irrational forces that influence their behaviour (Czander, 1993; Minsky, 1998; Mosse, 1994).

From a psychoanalytic perspective behaviour is fundamentally biological and instinctual in nature (Badcock, 1992). The focus is on the intra-psychic drives, needs and anxieties that direct behaviour (Thurschwell, 2000). Behaviour is seen as a product of the way that these drives, needs and anxieties are negotiated by the three dimensions of personality, the id, the ego and the superego (Freud, 1923). The id contains the unconscious instinctual drives, while the superego contains societal values, prohibitions and ideals (Badcock, 1992). The function of the ego is to attempt to mediate the conflict between the unconscious sexual and aggressive instincts of the id and the societal demands internalised in the superego (Thurschwell, 2000).

Traditionally psychoanalysis has been the domain of individual therapy, with its general aim of gaining insight into and an understanding of the inner world (Halton, 1994). According to Rutan and

Stone (1993), the focus of psychoanalysis and its field of application have expanded dramatically since the time that Freud formulated his theories. By elaborating on and further developing Freud's ideas, psychoanalytic theory has made valuable contributions to understanding the predominant needs and anxiety of individuals, organisations and society as a whole (Minsky, 1998; Rutan & Stone, 1993).

Psychoanalysis further accepts anxiety as the basis of organisational behaviour (Jacques, 1955; Menzies, 1993, Miller, 1998). Organisations, like individuals, employ defence mechanisms against difficult emotions which are too threatening or painful to deal with (Bain, 1998; Menzies, 1993). Although defence mechanisms are functional in that they help the organisation to cope with anxiety, they often lead to anti-task behaviour that can hinder the organisation from functioning effectively (Halton, 1994; Miller, 1998). Consultancy from this perspective would thus focus on the unconscious institutional anxieties and the defences against them (Allcorn, 1995; Bain, 1998; Kets De Vries, 1991).

#### b Object relations

Object relations provide a distinct interpersonal basis for understanding behaviour and focus on the analysis of the person and his/her objects (Czander, 1993). Where traditional psychoanalytic theory describes psychic development on the basis of biological derived drives, object relations theory views human interaction as the primary source of psychic development (Minsky, 1998). Instead of being motivated by tension reduction, as in traditional psychoanalytic theory, object relations view the establishment and maintenance of relationships as the motivating force behind human behaviour (Cashdan, 1988). The need to be attached, related and connected to other objects forms an integral part of object relations theory (Czander, 1993).

Object relations proceeds from the premise that people, over time, acquire the psychological capacity to relate to external (real) and internal (fantasies) objects (Cashdan, 1988). The term *object* is used, rather than a person, because the object of relations is not always a person; it may also refer to an organisation, a group, an idea, a symbol or parts of the body (Klein, 1997).

Klein's work on the development of infants and her ideas on how the same processes involved in the development of the infant continue to influence adult relationships, form the basis of object relations theory (Segal, 1996). According to Klein (1997) the infant seeks pleasure and comfort while avoiding pain and discomfort. The infant polarises his/her world according to the objects that give pleasure (good objects) and those that cause pain or discomfort (bad objects). The infant gains a sense of relief by splitting off and projecting the painful emotions away from himself/herself. Through natural maturation or treatment, previously separated feelings can be brought together again into a

more integrated whole. This movement from the polarisation of opposites to the integration of opposites recurs throughout life (Klein, 1997).

### *c Systems thinking*

The work of Von Bertalanffy (1966) serves as the foundation of systems thinking. It originated as a way of thinking about the constant, dynamic adjustments of living systems and proposes that an organism exists and survives through constant interaction with its environment (Miller & Rice, 1967). Systems thinking maintains that all systems fundamentally pose similarities in the underlying structure and organising processes used to survive within a specific environment (Rutan & Stone, 1993). Fundamental to these processes is the way that a system receives inputs from its environment, the way it is transformed within the system, with the resulting outputs of the system (Miller & Rice, 1967).

Another aspect of the structure of systems is that organisms are embedded in a set of supra- and superordinate systems and that an organism's interaction thus consists of relationships between its sub-systems, the relationships between the subsystems and the organism as a whole, and the relationship between the whole organism and its environment (Wells, 1985; Wheelan, 1994). As a result of this interconnectedness/interdependence of systems any change in one part of the system affects and generates change in all other parts of the system (Vorster, 2003). The above-mentioned similarities in the underlying structure and organising processes of systems imply that an organism, as a living system, can be studied according to the principles and laws that govern all living systems (Young, Wood, Phillips & Pedersen, 2001).

The following premises can be identified in systems thinking:

Living systems are open to interaction with their environment, converting inputs and maintaining an output system (Brabender & Fallon, 1993; Czander, 1993).

Parts of a system cannot be understood in isolation; any part of a system can only be understood within the context of the entire system (Halton, 1994; Rutan & Stone, 1993).

A system is more than the sum of its parts - once formed, a system engages in a ongoing process of defining and redefining itself; it creates new features that were not present at the outset (Czander, 1993; Vorster, 2003).

All parts of the system interact dynamically and constantly - this premise describes how parts of a system are intricately interconnected; each part affecting all the others. Changes in any one

system affect all other related systems. This can be likened to dropping a pebble in a pond (Roberts, 1994; Young et al, 2001).

An open system interacts with its environment in mutually influential ways - in the same way the parts of the group cannot be studied in isolation from one another, a group also cannot be studied in isolation from its context. The system forms part of many other systems whose influences must be taken into consideration (Vorster, 2003; Young et al, 2001).