Organizational Defenses Against Anxiety: What Has Happened Since the 1955 Jaques Paper?

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ABSTRACT

The idea of social defenses against paranoid and depressive anxiety has grown from a working hypothesis put forward by Jaques in 1955 into a theory of social defenses against the distressing and unbearable emotions aroused by organizational tasks and dynamics. Jaques reneged on his early ideas, dismissing psychodynamic causes and embracing structural explanations. But the application of social defense theory beyond micro-systems to broader systems dynamics has meant that psychodynamic and structural ideas of system and role have now become more integrated. Organizations contain many systems: task, political, social, technical. The community system level of organization is explored. When not consciously recognized as a system, people are unable to actively take up roles as citizens of the organization. Lack of recognition or assertion of such roles leaves subjectivity under threat. This is yet another source of social defenses. These ideas are explored through reference to inter-subjective theory. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: Elliott Jaques, group dynamics, psychoanalysis, Tavistock Institute of Human Relations

INTRODUCTION

This article looks at social defense theory, traceable back to an initial hypothesis put forward by Eliot Jaques in 1955. He proposed the idea of social systems as a defense against psychotic anxieties and has influenced a whole generation of organizational consultants and researchers since then. This was quite new. Could a whole social system become structured and behave as if it were defending its individual members, and perhaps its own integrity as a system, against anxieties arising in the system? Jaques was working on a large project within the Glacier Metal Company (Jaques, 1951, 1953, 1955) and his resulting ideas have
been used to aid in the solution of otherwise intractable or entrenched organizational problems. However, Jaques reneged and moved from concentrating on the culture and psychodynamics within a system, to focus on structure. Some of the issues concerning structure and culture and their influence on organizational development and sustainability will be examined here. I will also argue that the systems psychodynamic approach integrates findings from both structure and culture, and reaches far beyond any simple translation of psychoanalytic ideas from individual to organization.

To do this I briefly trace the development of social defense theory from its beginnings where it is used to analyze the dynamics of micro-systems (groups and organizations), through to its application to larger social dynamics. I do not intend to produce a history, but believe that current use and debates are informed by understanding the development and transformation of initial ideas. In the mid-1950s various psychoanalytic approaches to organizations were in their infancy (Trist and Murray, 1990; Trist et al., 1997; Fraher, 2004). The Group Relations movement that heavily utilizes approaches developed through Bion and the Tavistock Institute was just beginning with the first Leicester Conference in 1957. The intergroup and institutional events, features of Group Relations conferences that focus primarily on the total system of the conference beyond the groups that make up the conference, were not yet developed. Later developments have seen the further integration and application of psychoanalytic and systems concepts in the analysis of broader societal issues; what we might call macro-systems. The International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations (ISPSO) (www.ispso.org) was formed in the USA in 1983 and has now become an international society encompassing psychoanalytic approaches from Kleinian, Self Psychology, Jungian, and Lacanian perspectives. The ideas current today owe a lot to the early work of Jaques, but they have also come a long way from those roots in the development of more integrated psychoanalytic and systems ideas.

COMMUNITIES THAT ACT COLLECTIVELY YET UNCONSCIOUSLY

Since Freud the idea of psychological defense has become popularly accepted. That we unconsciously defend ourselves against thoughts and feelings that are distressing is not an unusual proposition. But what of the idea of a whole community using a defense such as denial to protect itself from something intuitively known but “unthought?” What of the picture of a community that acts collectively, if not consciously, to move unbearable and unthinkable feelings from one to another, like a hot potato thrown as soon as it is caught lest it remain too long in one place and burn the holder?

Jaques put forward the idea that a social system can act in a unified way “as if” it were an entity protecting its members from psychotic anxieties. Since then a whole tradition of thinking has emerged. I will examine some of this work,
leaving aside Jaques and his change of approach temporarily. That will be explored in a later section. Suffice to say here that even within the tradition that followed Jaques, the idea of collective unconscious dynamics is still debated and its solid theorization is continually in process.

The initial tradition Jaques worked within was informed by the work of Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion from the object relations approach within psychoanalysis, from the newly developing work at the Tavistock Clinic and, by 1947, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London. At the time of the birth of these ideas there was an atmosphere of excitement around new ways of looking at groups and institutions that could be informed by the findings of clinical psychoanalysis and systems thinking. The ideas emerged within a fulcrum sustained by a whole group of people at the newly formed Institute (Trist and Murray, 1990; Fraher, 2004). The various projects engaged there provided a foundation for later work in the areas of socio-technical processes, psychoanalytic approaches to organizations, and Group Relations – approaches that have spread to continents and countries across the world, including various European countries, Israel, India, Australia, and South America.

SOCIAL DEFENSE THEORY

Sometime in the last 10–15 years the term “social defense theory” has emerged. Although there are many articles, monographs, and books before this time that have referred to the classic Jaques 1955 article “Social Systems as a Defence Against Persecutory and Depressive Anxiety” or the ideas therein (for example, Menzies-Lyth, 1988; Miller and Gwynne, 1972; Main, 1988; Obholzer and Zagier Roberts, 1994) raising this to the status of a theory is relatively new. It certainly indicates that the central idea, viz., that a social system, through unconscious processes and phantasy produces a culture and structures whereby the individuals in the system are defended against psychotic anxieties, has been so adequately demonstrated through its use and application that it is no longer considered simply a working hypothesis, but a theory. (Examples of reference to a theory of social defenses may be found by many authors in recent books devoted to multiple authors; for example, Gould et al., 2002, 2004; French and Vince, 1999; Klein, Gablenick and Herr, 1998; Hinshelwood and Skogstad, 2000; Huffington et al., 2004).

So how might we delineate the essence of this theory? Jaques (1955) put forward a hypothesis:

The specific hypothesis I shall consider is that one of the primary cohesive elements binding individuals into institutionalized association is that of defence against psychotic anxiety. In this sense individuals may be thought of as externalizing those impulses and internal objects that would otherwise give rise to psychotic anxiety, and pooling them into the life of the social institutions in which they associate. This is not to say that the institutions so used thereby become “psychotic.” But it does imply that we would expect to find in group relationships manifestations of unreality, splitting, hostility, suspicion,
and other forms of maladaptive behavior. These would be the social counterpart of – although not identical with – what would appear as psychotic symptoms in individuals who have not developed the ability to use the mechanism of association in social groups to avoid psychotic anxiety. (Jaques, 1955: 497)

Jaques’ article explores this hypothesis through examples in social life and a specific case study where the dynamics surround the relations between managers and their subordinates within one department. Unable to reach a decision about how to implement a change to payment methods, the management and worker representatives seemed at a deadlock with rising hostility in their talks. Despite these difficulties in the negotiation process, Jaques noticed that work in the department was proceeding with no seeming ill effects or strained relationships. The same people who were in hostile dispute during negotiations were working alongside each other productively.

Jaques explained this through analysis of the unconscious dynamics in the culture. These dynamics are centered on issues of authority and associated unconscious phantasies. The dynamics described include splitting, projective identification, and deflection. In particular, the splitting occurs around the different tasks involved in the relations between the workers and their managers. In brief, the workers were suspicious of the manager’s motives with respect to the payment system and yet comfortable in working with them on a day-to-day basis. This, says Jaques, indicates splitting. He hypothesized that, in the minds of the workers the same managers were experienced as “good” or “bad” depending upon whether they were relating to them in the work task or in the negotiation task. Projecting their own “bad impulses” into their representatives who negotiated with the “bad” negotiating managers allowed for an external “bad object” to be created as a protection for workers from paranoid anxieties aroused by disturbing internal impulses. Projecting “good” into the managers in the work situation “allowed the workers to reintroject the good relations with management, and hence to preserve an undamaged and good object and alleviate depressive anxiety” (Jaques, 1955: 491). In other words, the workers felt guilt and depressive anxieties due to their projection of “badness” into the managers and, indeed, into their own representatives in the negotiation process. By feeling good about the managers during the work process, this guilt and anxiety was alleviated.

Jaques also describes the managers as holding an idealized view of the workers which acted, in phantasy, to placate the hostile representatives and to diminish their own depressive anxieties and guilt about unconscious fears of damaging the workers through their daily exercise of managerial authority. These dynamics reinforced one another and negotiations reached a stalemate.

Following the description of the case study, Jaques moves to the further question of organizational change, stressing the need to understand the dynamics that hold the system in stasis. Having only touched on Jaques’ analysis, I urge the reader to consult the source. However, it is important that many of the seeds for the fuller development of the theory are present. That is: (i) the central
hypothesis of social defense systems, as described above, which includes (ii) the idea that social defenses provide a kind of institutional glue or binding function; (iii) the interrelatedness of task and dynamics; (iv) the fact that changes bring about a disruption to the defenses established over time and hence change will be resisted for unconscious as well as conscious and more obvious reasons.

Menzies-Lyth’s (1988) classic 1959 study of the operation of social defenses in a teaching hospital has somewhat eclipsed the Jaques article and seems to take center stage in the further development of the theory. Menzies-Lyth uses Jaques’ ideas but takes them further. She emphasizes the effect that the primary task of the institution has on the development of psychotic anxieties and the social defenses against them. The nursing task, through its direct and intimate handling of sick and dying patients, raises infantile conflicts around death and sexuality in nurses. These infantile conflicts, previously unconsciously managed successfully, threaten to become conscious. Moreover, the task necessitates transgression of many social taboos surrounding sexuality and death. For example, the intimate physical care given to the patient’s body necessitated by nursing. The hospital culture developed ways of working and structuring that places a social defense against these phantasies and the anxieties they arouse. Through physically, psychologically, and symbolically distancing the nurse from the patient and hence from the anxiety-provoking emotions that might emerge, these defenses help protect individual nurses from directly experiencing the anxiety. Other defenses materialize in the form of an unnecessarily strictly imposed hierarchy that infantilizes the nurse and robs the role of necessary discretionary authority. Unfortunately, such systemic defenses interfere with the primary task of the nurse in providing care and also create secondary anxieties in the workplace that themselves create defenses. Nurses recognize the obstacles to themselves and their patients imposed by a system of work that psychologically distances them from each other. Here the social defense system had ill effects.

The task as a source of workplace anxieties is considered by many psychologists and occupational therapists as an important form of workplace hazard. However, beyond the stresses on the individual is the threat to the culture of the workplace, its productivity and capacity to change with a changing context. Obholzer (1999) says:

> The assumption is that there is anxiety specific to and arising from the nature of the work and that the institution defends itself against this anxiety in such a way that the emphasis of the structure is on defence-related rather than work-related functioning. . . .

> If this is correct, then it is important for managers to realize that any attempt to alter the specific way in which work is organized in their institution must, by definition, mean a disruption of the anxiety-holding system, with a consequent release into the structure of anxiety and resistance to change. (Obholzer, 1999: 91–92)

The importance of task in shaping workplace anxieties and the resultant social defense systems in institutions has become central to the theory, and to the
Group Relations (Rice, 1965; French and Vince, 1999; Miller, 2004; Fraher, 2004, 2005) and Psychodynamic approaches to organizational and institutional life. Obholzer and Roberts (1994) collection of essays and case studies set within the health industry illustrate this amply, as do the many cases presented in journals and reported in research theses. Hinshelwood and Skogstad (2000) report on a method of observing organizational dynamics based predominantly on exploring institutions as social defense systems and their authors provide case studies illustrating the value of such an approach. They use the term “culture” to define the subjective world that mediates between the task, with its associated anxieties, and the defense, and thus name their model an “anxiety–culture–defense model” (Hinshelwood and Skogstad, 2000: 16). The centrality of the “social defences against anxiety approach” is again taken up by Hinshelwood and Chiesa (2002).

The anxiety–culture–defense model described by Hinshelwood and Skogstad (2000) can serve as a general model for social defense theory. It proposes that anxieties originating in people’s responses to their work tasks, stimulating primitive anxieties and experienced by many within the organization (or society) lead to a collective defense. This collective defense becomes part of the culture and structure of the organization. That is, it becomes part of the way things get done. The anxieties may be part of the primary task, say, of nursing, or teaching, or accountancy, but they may also be part of associated tasks such as management or taking up “authority for role” in face of disagreements. Anxieties may arise from normal workplace interactions and communications (Hirschhorn, 1988). Moreover, social defenses may operate to protect people from other distressing emotions, such as anger, envy, or shame.

THE ISSUE AND PARADOX OF CHANGE

It would seem then, that the idea of social defenses against anxiety has moved from an interesting hypothesis to an important conceptual framework. It provides another insight into the paradox of change (Smith and Berg, 1987). Social defense theory helps us to understand why, in the face of compelling logical reasons, change is so difficult to effect in organizations, institutions, and communities, and provides reasons for why and how institutions are able to remain cohesive and sustained over time. Loss of social defenses would lead organization members to exposure to overwhelming anxieties or other unbearable emotions. The presence of social defenses allows people to work in anxiety-provoking situations. Problems arise when the defense system itself works against engaging the task.

Because of the paradox inherent in the change/stability dynamic, some studies of large social defense systems end in a kind of resignation that, despite the need for change, the size, complexity, and sheer entrenchment of the culture mitigate against it. This is also despite the conclusions that if defenses were recognized and worked through reason and development might prevail. I have
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Given the Menzies-Lyth article to many nurses for the past 35 years and their recognition of the issues, although giving them some relief that the seeming madness in their own systems has its own “method,” also indicates the stability of the broader hospital system and the tenacity and strength of its social defenses despite recognition of the need for change. For system change, as with change for individuals, the solution may be for small adjustments, reconciliation to complex conditions, and consolation through changed conditions for small sections of a wider system. Some units in some hospitals; some classes in some schools; some departments in some bureaucracies have been able to work more readily to manage and contain the damaging effects of social defenses that emerge from within their sectors. In many cases, defenses operate that allow the work to proceed; in others, the effect for individuals is burnout and for organizations, inefficiencies and, at worse, a socially toxic environment.

But, what of a broader application of the idea? As well as illuminating the findings from specific case study organizations, the idea of social systems as a defense against anxiety has been applied to broader systems or domains. Gilmore and Krantz (1990) look at how leadership and management have been split in the thinking of managers and leaders in corporations and bureaucracies. They suggest how the valorization of leaders and denigration of management often appear as two sides of a defensive coin:

The splitting apart of leadership and management, with the concomitant idealization of one and the denigration of the other leads to two distinct manifestations. One is managerialism, the magical investment in technique and method. The other is heroic leadership, the magical hope for a saviour from fossilized organizations . . . both represent a societal level defense against the anxieties inherent in realizing the need for a deep restructuring of contemporary organizations . . . in confronting the different world in which we live. (Gilmore and Krantz, 1990: 202)

I have written about consumerism as a defense against uncertainty and in a linked dynamic, economic rationalism as a broad social defense against a social anxiety of economic loss (Long, 1999). I raised and supported six working hypotheses. These demonstrate how consumerism simplifies roles and tasks – every role becomes a consumer role – and is dynamically structured like secondary narcissism and hence provides a social equivalent of individual narcissism; viz., the individualist position in economics and other social processes. Alongside this, economic rationalism provides a rationalization of individualism as a subjective position, confuses the method – of achieving good economic practice – with the aims and values of the community or the organization and utilizes managerialism as a vehicle for the operation of this social defense. “Work organizations, while previously based on a relation of dependency, now operate on a relation of instrumental individualism.” (Long, 1999: 733)

This work takes the idea of social defense into a broad social arena operating culturally and structurally between prevalent mental models. These mental models shape and sustain social institutions. The critical point here is that social
defenses are not only intrapsychic structures shared by different covalent individuals as first delineated by Jaques and Menzies. They enter social structure in more pervasive ways. Just as linguistic structure and lexicon derives not from the individual who speaks or writes, but from the whole of the common language community, so social structures, some of which are defensive, belong to the shared Symbolic level (Lacan, 1977) of a community.

Despite these developments, a few decades of conceptualizing and researching social defenses has not brought many long-reaching results at an institutional level. Some of the changes we require cannot wait for a slow process of adjustment: the big issues of global warming, AIDS, and the wars and hostilities that lead to immediate deaths and the starvation and misery of multitudes. At a more local level, some businesses fail, some community endeavors disintegrate because their members are unable to adjust to changing circumstances and the challenge to a social defense system that once provided a good-enough security for past circumstances but can no longer provide a good-enough containment for the new circumstances. We can now see in many of these cases the social defenses operating in a destructive way, but finding alternatives cannot be simply or quickly accomplished. If we have come to see and articulate the problem, we have not yet found long-term solutions.

To discover the shape of the social defenses in an organization may be the first step in achieving more appropriate and creative responses to distressing and unbearable emotions. But what are the next steps? We have more understanding of what is going on, but find ourselves just as perplexed about issues of change as we ever were. This may have been the position Jaques found himself in when he moved to a more directly structural explanation. Clarifying and changing structures seemed to work for him where understanding the dynamics did not take him any further. Others have also worked at change, recognizing the existence of unconscious dynamics but pushing direct work with them to the background; for example, the socio-ecological perspective (Trist et al., 1997) and open space technologies. So where is the heritage of social defense theory?

**INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND COMMUNITY**

I will take further the idea of social defenses against distressing and unbearable emotions in our broader social systems. To do this I need to shift focus from a strictly object relations approach to the intersubjective approach. This approach has a history through authors such as Hegel and Winnicott and finds more recent expression in the work of Benjamin (1988). A major motif of the intersubjective position is the possibility of equality of relationship between subjectivities. Here, equality refers to the mutual existence, assertion, and recognition of subjectivities. This includes the recognition of the need for an “other” subjectivity in order that our own subjectivity might exist and be asserted. The other is not simply an “object” to be internalized into a world of inner objects.
for solipsistic use, although it may play this part on many occasions. The other is required to be really “other” for subjectivity to develop. In Winnicott’s famous terms “there is no baby without a mother.” That is, the roles require each other. In Hegel’s terms, the Master needs the Slave to be a master. Without the recognition of his mastery by the Slave, he cannot be the Master. For this recognition to occur, the Slave must still have the capacity to retain some aspect of his freedom: his capacity and authority to bestow recognition on another subjectivity. Perhaps this is the essence of freedom. Herein lies the paradox of the Master–Slave relation.

The intersubjective approach implicitly recognizes system and role. Subjectivity is not synonymous with individuality but a position within a system (Lacan, 1977) in relation to other subjectivities. In everyday terms this means that for each role we take up in a system there are role counterparts. For a doctor there must be a patient (and perhaps a hospital administrator, or a government health provider, depending on the system); for a teacher, a student, educational bureaucrats, parents, and so on.

Where this is true for work task systems, it is equally true for political systems, economic systems, symbolic systems, and socio-emotional systems. Each work organization has within it task, economic, linguistic, political, and emotional systems. They are made up of the same people (i.e. they are not subsystems), but operate differently in the mind and hence in the way we act. They may operate in concert or clash. When about to make a decision it is sometimes helpful to wonder “What system am I operating in at the moment?” If we are caught in a political system making decisions about how to fulfill a part of the work-task, we had better know it!

Our subjectivities are discovered through our subjection to roles in these systems. Role lies at the intersection between the person and the system or organization (Newton, Long and Sievers, 2006). It mediates organizational life and allows the person to find a place or identity in relation to others. It is far more than the position within a task system because it incorporates the person who is part of many different systems. Role is a very lively concept and through taking up the authorities and accountabilities that different roles offer, we learn to become effective social beings. Understanding the roles that are taken up allows for a better understanding of the systems we are in (the organizations and systems in our experience) and, hence, the frameworks from which we interact with others.

One system is what I have termed the “community-level system” (Long, 2002). This can be within a work organization, a corporation, a church, school, or even a local organized community. In this community-level system, we take up the role of community member, which is somewhat akin to “citizen” of the broader organization. Language may become confusing so clarification is required at this point because I am differentiating the “community-level system” from the domain-level, “Local Community.”

There are systems at all levels but the following schema may help.
I am using the term “community-level system” for want of a better phrase. It is built on the notion, described above, that organizations have many systems within which their members take up and are offered roles. One of my working hypotheses is that there is a systemic community level in any organization. That is, a level of interaction and relatedness affected by and affecting task (and other) systems yet different to the task system. I think it is a system of values and purposes where people within the organization interact around values and beliefs – community or communitas. In this sense it underlies the task system where task is driven by purpose with implicit values. The community-level system has the flavour of a system where roles are focused on intersubjective equalities.

SOCIAL DEFENSES AND THE COMMUNITY SYSTEM LEVEL IN MICRO-SYSTEMS

What has this to do with social defenses against distressing and unbearable emotions? Social defenses, as they operate in micro-systems (groups, departments, organizations) are unconscious collusions or agreements to distort or deny those aspects of experience that in phantasy give rise to unwanted emotion. The distortion, for example, may be in the belief that management is totally bad and not to be trusted during negotiations (part of the organization political system), as in Jaques’ study, even though this is not sustained in the experience of working with management on a day-to-day basis (the work-task system). The anxiety defended against may be the paranoid anxiety of being exploited during changes to established practices.

What is under threat? One hypothesis is that (in addition to the traditional social defense theories) some unconscious social defenses may operate when people feel their subjectivity under threat; when the role of “community member” is threatened. This may be through not having an authentic voice in the organization or by going unrecognized in work or endeavor; through being used instrumentally or perversely. Examples of such a defense would be the assumption of a false self within the corporation; the taking on of a role that stands in opposition to one’s beliefs and values, and hence being conflicted; the following of narcissistic pathways that reject or deny the group through basic Assumption Me (Lawrence, Bain and Goud, 1996).

Consider the Menzies-Lyth study. The hospital developed a culture whereby the student nurse role was infantalized and nurses were kept at a distance psychologically from their patients. Patients were objectified – “the liver in bed five”
and thus unable to provide the recognition needed by the nurse (as with the paradox of the Master–Slave relation) who also cannot assert her authority for task because of the infantalization of her role. The task system operated: beds were made, temperatures were taken, but many student nurses dropped out because the social defense system formed, it is hypothesized here, an assault on their capacity to further develop their role and their personal subjectivity within role. Many nurses did not have personal defense systems congruent with the social defense system of the institution. In my terms, the social defense system was an assault on their capacity to further develop their place within the community-level of the hospital as well as to take up the nursing task. Menzies-Lyth found that the social defense system developed to minimize the experience of task aspects that most directly aroused unconscious phantasies about sexual intimacy and death. But, in addition, I suspect the hospital training system had no way of directly helping student nurses to surface and face their fears. There was no real subjective “other” for the student nurse to encounter. The task system became objectified and student nurses were not encouraged to look at the values and purposes underlying the work; perhaps because there was no real leadership available or developed for this process.

**TASK AND COMMUNITY-LEVEL SYSTEMS**

In exploring the distinction between the task and the community-level system I return to Jaques’ move from a psychodynamic to a structural perspective (Jaques, 1989). When Jaques recanted his early position about the influence of directly psychoanalytic dynamics (Jaques, 1995) his argument was that they are an effect rather than a cause of organizational structure. A major reason for Jaques’ rejection of his former work on social defenses was because he came to the view that “psychoanalytic insights do not, and cannot, beget organizational knowledge or wisdom” (Jaques, 1995: 345). He argues the need for more understanding of organizations *per se*. He describes organizations as “an interconnected system of roles (positions) with explicit or implicit mutual accountabilities and authorities” (Jaques, 1995: 343) and equates position with role in the task system. Much of the debate with Amado published in this 1995 issue of *Human Relations* centers on whether or not an organization is essentially the structure of the positions and their authorities and accountabilities, or whether roles are essentially peopled. Jaques’ position is that structure *per se* constitutes the organization; people come to fill positions and are affected by the ways the positions are set up. Nonrequisite ways of setting up positions, he believes, lead to dysfunctional behaviors. Amado believes that roles are more than positions; they are positions filled by people and the organization does not, in effect, come into being until people fill the roles. From Jaques’ perspective, no amount of work on interpersonal relations or group dynamics will rectify the damage done by poor structural arrangements. From Amado’s perspective “intrapsychic forces necessarily interfere with organizational roles and behaviors” (Jaques, 1995: 354).
Surprisingly, in 1995 Jaques fails to see that defensive systems dynamics can be understood as part of a culture beyond interpersonal or group dynamics. This is perhaps not so surprising if he did not follow the later development of those ideas. The examples given in his and Menzies-Lyth’s early work are from micro-systems. As well as unconscious collusions in micro-systems, however, there are the much broader unconscious agreements found in shared mental models across a culture, as I have argued (Long, 1999). Now, 50 years after Jaques’ original work, this position of Jaques vis-à-vis systems and organizations per se has increasingly entered the social systems as a defense against anxiety literature. However, both structure and culture are seen as interconnected and not simply the effects of a linear causality (James and Huffington, 2004).

It may seem strange to liken broad social dynamics (viz., unconscious agreements found in shared mental models across a culture) to collusions in micro-systems because in the broader macro-system they appear to be simply part of the culture, the “way of doing things” learned throughout life. We might ask, “How can the implicit agreement about linguistic use found between language users be seen as collusion?” When “agreement as collusion” is applied to ideas of the dynamic unconscious in micro-systems (including the micro-system of the individual personality) it brings forward the idea of personal will. Through willful volition an individual, albeit unconsciously, may collude with others. Freud was able to demonstrate the paradox of unconscious will in his theory of psychoanalysis. Intentions do occur at an unconscious level.

In broader social systems the idea of the dynamic unconscious as formulated by Freud must be modified, however, because it is still counterintuitive and paradoxical to understand social forces as part of willful volition. But, the more we move from ideas of the personal unconscious toward ideas of a level of cultural unconscious, such as formulated in the Lacanian ideas of the Symbolic, the more we require conceptions that understand social and cultural mores and “agreements” as serving actively defensive as well as simply tacit functions. For Lacan, the paradox of the individual dynamic unconscious in Psychoanalysis is implicitly embedded in a broader Symbolic field. Unconscious process occurs not simply in a social context but forms the fabric of social symbolic processes. Also, it is only when we think all unconscious agreement is destructive that we lose its more constructive implications. Lawrence points this out in his adoption of Bion’s use of the idea of the “infinite” rather than unconscious (Lawrence, 1998).

Now, here is the crux of the debate about the usefulness of psychoanalytic exploration in understanding the organization per se as system. Jaques was unable to extend his own psychoanalytic thinking into the dynamics of macro-systems because he did not move from the limitation of seeing unconscious process as personal and interpersonal. He regarded the organization per se as only a system of positions in the task system rather than a system of roles that engaged subjectivities also at the community system level. It is as if we experience our roles
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in different systems (e.g. task- and community-level systems) as split off from one another rather than integrated through our subjectivity.

Jaques clarifies that he is focused on what he calls “accountability hierarchies.” In fact, many of his ideas here are nowadays incorporated into a psychoanalytic approach to organizations, especially following the work of Rice (1965) and others in the Group Relations tradition. Task is regarded as a critical organizing principle. Accountability hierarchies are task systems. People come to be members of accountability hierarchies through the process of becoming employed. It is basically an instrumental relationship for organizing task responsibilities. There is an exchange of labor for money.

Group Relations theorists and practitioners argue that authority essentially derives from the (agreed) task. From this perspective, upon agreement to employment our authority to choose, decide, and act comes through the tasks we have agreed to do, or are given through that ubiquitous statement “any other duties that the head of department requires.” In accountability hierarchies this task idea becomes translated through the offices and positions of the organization. The position and the task become equated. It is the office that counts in the traditional Weberian bureaucracy. Authority for task in an accountability hierarchy derives from the way that the task is organized. This counts from the Board down through the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), to the managers, to the workers. And accountability travels up from the workers, who are accountable to the managers, who are accountable to the CEO, and from there to the Board. The language is “up” and “down;” “superior” and “subordinate.” If the clarity of structure, role, accountability, and authority holds then the task system should operate effectively. But this clarity will only hold if the agreements between role holders, both conscious and unconscious, are mutually understood and adhered to. The way that such agreements hold, through policies, structures, organizational culture, and communication is complex and depends on how people are able to take up roles, communicate, appropriately exercise authority, and utilize policy in creative and noncorrupt ways. And it is this task system that sometimes becomes organized around a social defense rather than a reasoned and agreed organization of task.

What is enormously helpful about the idea of task systems and their organization into accountability hierarchies is that through this conceptualization we can often help people struggling with organizational problems to more deeply explore their authority and accountability relations. Complex organizational structures such as matrix and network organizations, especially in a multinational context, are shifting us away from traditional accountability hierarchies, but the idea of tracing (implicit and unconsciously enacted) authorities and accountabilities within the task system so that they might be consciously understood and agreed is still helpful. Moreover, such structures still retain within them a basic hierarchy accountable to a Board or at least a CEO. The questions about accountability in these structures become: “Is work organized around task or around a corruption of task, brought about by social defenses against unbearable—
able emotions?” “Is authority for decision-making and action based on account-
ability to the task (as represented in authorized roles) or based on personal power
within a political-rather than task-based system?”

But what of systems other than the task system? How do the roles we take
up in other organizational systems interact with our roles in the task system?
Jaques discussed another organizational form. Associations are organizations
where members come together and agree a purpose. Here the organization is
one of partnership not hierarchy. The relationship might be described as one
of mutuality or intersubjectivity. Where the association has tasks to do, a hier-
archy or other accountability structure may be organized, but the association
itself is not a task system. For example, in a professional association members
join because they value what their association can provide. There may be
tasks to achieve: conducting conferences; regulating training; managing
association finances; and these may be organized into a task system whereby
the association employs officers or utilizes member volunteers where
hierarchical accountabilities and authority are relevant. But for the association
members qua members, the relation is one of sharing mutual values, interests,
and achievements. As a member of the association each person is taking up a
role at the community system level. In the Association, this role is evident. It is
central.

In work organizations that are accountability hierarchies, the community
system level is not so evident. It is sometimes expressed in informal settings – the
teatoom, corridor chats, or at social gatherings; or unconsciously through collu-
sions and basic assumptions. But these are not settings that give the community
system-level members an open voice to connect them to the organization as a
whole. They do not provide the settings where members can gain organizational
recognition as subjectivities outside the essential, if paradoxical, domination
implicit in hierarchy and the task system. Expression of membership of the com-
munity system-level in an organization is expression of subjectivity, of personal
authority, and of the creativity that goes with this. Trades unions have at times
been able to tap into this level of organizational life as have quality of work life
programs. Sometimes, such a setting or psychological space is seemingly achieved
in corporations through an appeal to workers to identify with the organization
through their place in the task system. But too often this is a dupe and simply
the result of an encultured “deep acting” (Hoggett, 2002) as if the false self of
the imposed and external task, without an accompanying intersubjectivity
around purpose were enough. Often, true commitment to task comes from con-
nexion; also, through the collective values that workplace members hold.
Otherwise work is simply instrumental.

One way of inviting people to take up their roles within the community-level
system is to provide space, time, and leadership for its exploration. Within an
organization, this might be provided through reflective space or social dreaming
(Lawrence, 1998). Within a society this might be provided through, for instance,
reflective meetings or reconciliation processes.
One key point is that intersubjectivity amongst interacting members of a community-level system provides a social “glue,” as does a common task, and as does a common culture, as suggested by Jaques. We have long understood the connectedness of people through the task system. How this is related also to their connectedness in community, through intersubjectivity requires more exploration. We might wonder how things might be for us in the West if, like the King of Butan, we decided to think of measuring our capital in terms of Gross Human Happiness instead of Gross National profit, or at least if we made attempts in this direction.

CONCLUSION

The idea of social defenses against paranoid and depressive anxiety has grown from a working hypothesis put forward by Jaques in 1955 into a theory that informs professionals who work in the tradition of the psychoanalytic and systems approaches to the study of organizations. The theory has enabled the examination of the development and persistence of organizational structures and cultures that sometimes operate more defensively than in pursuit of their primary task. That is, the task is avoided, often because of the distressing and unbearable emotions that it arouses.

Jaques reneged on his early view that psychoanalytic exploration of organizational dynamics was useful because he came to regard these dynamics as the effects of poor structure rather than their cause. His focus moved to what he saw as the structure of the organization per se. However, as social defense theory developed further, its application to broader systems dynamics, not simply to micro-systems, has meant that structural ideas of system and role have become more fully integrated. We can no longer see simple linear causal explanations between structure and behavior as sufficient. Role is not simply a position in the task system; it is a complex meeting of person and institution. Role in any one system may be affected by roles taken up in other systems within the same organization or institution.

I have suggested that intersubjective theories may provide an additional perspective. Based on the idea that subjectivities are developed through interaction with other subjectivities (not only through the phantasy incorporation of others as internal objects) intersubjective theories offer the paradox of mutual recognition and assertion as the basis of even the most seemingly inequitable relations such as the Master–Slave relation. The paradox is evident in the fact that this equality lies at what I have called the community-level system, even if it is not present in other systems such as the political or task systems. I also suggest that social defenses may operate when the community-level system goes unrecognized or when people are not invited to take up roles at this system level. When not consciously recognized as a system, people are unable to actively take up roles as citizens of the organization. Lack of recognition or assertion of such roles leaves subjectivity under threat.
The ideas that Jaques raised about social defenses in organizations need to move more fully into a broader social analysis if substantial social change is to be achieved; or at least, for us to understand some of the entrenched and unhealthy aspects of our social institutions.

NOTE

1 I am in debt here to Wendy Harding, who is working with understanding large groups from an intersubjective theory perspective, and through discussions reconnected me to the work of Jessica Benjamin.

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