


# The systems psychodynamic experiences of organisational transformation amongst support staff

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**Orientation:** The unconscious impact of organisational transformation is often neglected and even denied. This research revealed the manifestation and impact of high levels and different forms of anxiety experienced by employees during transformation.

**Research objective:** The objective was to study and describe the manifesting systems psychodynamic behaviour amongst support staff during organisational transformation.

**Motivation for the study:** Organisational transformation is mostly researched from a leadership viewpoint. Little research data are available on the experiences of support staff on the receiving end of decisions about and implementation of transformation.

**Research design, approach and method:** A qualitative approach within the phenomenological hermeneutic interpretive stance was used. The research was set in a government organisation. A semi-structured interview with four conveniently and purposefully chosen support staff members was thematically analysed using systems psychodynamics as theoretical paradigm.

**Main findings:** Four themes manifested, namely de-authorisation and detachment, being bullied and seduced by leadership, the organisation in the mind as incompetent, and a dangerous and persecutory system. In the discussion, the basic assumptions and relevant constructs are interpreted.

**Practical implications:** Understanding the transformation experiences of support staff could assist the industrial psychologist to facilitate appropriate support in coaching more junior staff towards increasing wellness and work performance.

**Contribution:** Organisational transformation is highlighted as an anxiety provoking experience especially on the lower levels of the organisation. Its potentially deep and complex psychological impact could possibly derail parts of the system if not managed in a psychologically contained manner.

## Introduction

Organisational change and transformation has become the greatest unavoidable challenge to the modern organisation's survival (Jaques, Clement & Lessem, 2003). Unfortunately, the management of change and transformation projects fails in about 70% of cases because of it being one of the most difficult and complex tasks facing any organisation (Jabri, 2015). This research did not focus on the nature of transformation or a specific change process but rather on the experiences of some of its employees from a depth psychology perspective.

The literature on change and transformation contains a wide range of theories and advice designed to aid change agents in their understanding and managing of its complexity (Henderson & Boje, 2015), albeit often more overwhelming than helpful in its competing and conflicting approaches and advice. Change is differentiated from, yet always connected to, transformation (Henderson & Boje, 2015). Change is defined as any kind of renewal in an organisation's direction, processes, structure and customer relations (Jabri, 2015; Moran & Brightman, 2001). Although not all change is transformational, all transformational matters cause change (Daszko & Sheinberg, 2005). Organisational transformation (OT) represents an intentional, fundamental and radical shift in thinking or mind-set towards movement from one state of being to another in an effort to influence the organisational identity in coping with a crisis, staying relevant and sustaining itself (Anderson & Anderson, 2001; Burnes & Randall, 2015; Daszko & Sheinberg, 2005; De Wit & Meyer, 2005). On the macro (organisational) level, OT focuses on coping effectively with globalisation, mergers, acquisitions, skills and developmental scarcity, and increased competition (Denton & Vloeberghs, 2003; Nohria & Khurana, 2010). On the meso (group) level, OT focuses on

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the optimisation of teamwork and transformational leadership (Bennis, 2007), and on the micro (individual) level, it focuses on effective career management, work-life balance and employee wellness and growth (Harding, 2006; Tams & Arthur, 2010). Many OT types and models exist (Viljoen, 2015) relevant to the scope and type of difference to be facilitated. Cultural transformation, mergers and acquisitions, new business ventures and business process engineering require radical inputs, whereas right-sizing focuses on the functionality of job content, restructuring on organisational processes, total quality management on large scale systemic changes and automisation on systemic procedures.

Change and transformation research generally focus on leadership's perspectives on and experiences of the planning and implementation of change (Hughes, 2015). In this scenario, followership typically receives instructions about the fast implementation of change endeavours without being informed about the background, rationale, reasons for implementation and the effects on their employment or career aspects (Anderson & Anderson, 2001; De Jager, Cilliers & Veldsman, 2004; Fuda, 2013; Hirschhorn & Barnett, 1999; Pearson, 2012). This situation is exacerbated in government organisations because of traditional bureaucratic protection mechanisms, a lack of transparency and legislation such as the Protection of State Information Bill (2012), which imposes restrictions on the sharing of information (Diamond & Allcorn, 2009). Previous research also suggests that support staff, being hierarchically the furthest away from the core of OT decision-making, may experience relatively more stress than those closer involved in change decisions (Nohria & Khurana, 2010).

Most OT research is presented from an applied social and individual psychology and humanistic viewpoint, studying conscious behaviour and using quantitative research designs (Henderson & Boje, 2015). This research typically refers to how employees' work performance, outputs and time management are negatively influenced, manifesting as diminished cognitive abilities (e.g. lack of concentration and focus), emotional instability (e.g. anger, aggression, exhaustion and depression), internal motivation and poor interpersonal relationships (Jabri, 2015). In the same vein, positive organisational psychology research reports on employees' heightened stress levels, diminished coping capacity and functioning in various constructs such as engagement, resilience, flow and flourishing (Rothmann & Cooper, 2015). In South Africa, the added complexity of legislation and diversity management principles (Coetzee & Cilliers, 2012) as inherent requirements for organisational relevance, attracting and retaining top talent (Hosking, 2008), add to employees' stress levels (Rothmann & Cooper, 2015).

The predominant focus on conscious behaviour in OT research implies that relatively less is known about the nature and intensity of transformational anxiety 'below the surface' of consciousness (Huffington, Armstrong, Halton, Hoyle & Pooley, 2004). The construct of resistance to change (RTC) is often used in the literature to explain the link and difference

between conscious and unconscious behaviour (Dent & Goldberg, 1999b). Consciously and rationally, RTC is typically seen as manifesting when an individual or group of employees express or demonstrate their dissatisfaction about the implementation of something different or new concerning structure or culture (on the macro level), resource allocation or group cohesion (on the meso level), and about being treated with disrespect or being disempowered (on the micro level) (Henderson & Boje, 2015; Swanepoel, Schenk, Van Wyk & Erasmus, 2003; Ten Have, Ten Have, Huijsmans & Van der Eng, 2015). When studying the organisation's unconscious behaviour, RTC is seen as and interpreted in line with its original conceptualisation by Kurt Lewin (Dent & Goldberg, 1999a). RTC is a systemic, functional and irrational expression of anxiety about the unknown and potential loss of precious objects (e.g. attention, comfort, status) followed by various individual, social and system domain defensive structures and proclivities (Diamond & Allcorn, 2009; Krantz, 2001). RTC does not belong to an individual or a group as a subject, but to the role taken up as an object on behalf of the larger organisational system, often strengthened by the expressing object's valence (predisposition) to act out the specific resistance (Dent & Goldberg, 1999a; Ford, Ford & D'Amelo, 2008). Three such roles are identified – the endorser, fence-sitter and the resistor. Where organisational systems are loosely coupled (underbound), role players may move easily from one role to another, whereas when they are tightly coupled (overbound and/or entrenched in an anal manner), moving between roles is difficult and role players may get stuck in their systemic roles. This view does not see the role of an OT consultant to take the resistance away, but rather to engage with all three roles through genuine and authentic systemic listening towards understanding of what is verbalised and what that represents for the whole system. Especially the fence-sitter as a middle position has the potential to inform the consultant about the systemic dynamic and its content and intensity.

According to Sievers (2009), these unconscious OT behaviours are not often investigated in organisations because of its complexity and difficulty to measure. He suggests using the systems psychodynamic perspective as a depth psychological approach to transformation (Gould, Stapley & Stein, 2006). This facilitates insight into transformation as acting as an unconscious object filled with deep levels of anxiety, uncertainty and ambivalence about direction, strategy and vision, which could result in systemic identity changes on the individual, group and organisational levels. Kets de Vries, Korotov and Florent-Treacy (2007) describes the psychodynamic process underlying transformation as concern followed by confrontation, clarification, crystallisation and eventually internalised change. International (Hirschhorn, 1993) and South African (Cilliers, 2006; Cilliers & Stone, 2005; De Jager *et al.*, 2004; Geldenhuys, 2012; Van Eeden & Cilliers, 2009) research using this depth psychological perspective has shown how these complex and unconscious behavioural processes manifest in organisational systems. The findings show that OT becomes a potential space containing the irrationality of the organisational system, the anxiety and its

defensive proclivities, and ways in which staff members experience the motives and management of transformation, and often feel scapegoated and bullied (Bion, 1961; Cilliers, 2012; Czander, 1993; Stapley, 2006).

## Systems psychodynamics

Originating at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the UK, systems psychodynamics is grounded in social psychoanalytic, group relations, object relations and open systems theory (Colman & Bexton, 1975; Colman & Geller, 1985; Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004). It provides an organisational theory towards the understanding and explaining of systemic structures and its relatedness to deep seated, unconscious and unarticulated individual, social and organisational anxiety (Armstrong, 2005; Gould *et al.*, 2006). According to Bion (1961), open systems function in two modes of operation at the same time. The workgroup refers to the conscious focus on the sophisticated organisational task, whereas the basic assumption group functions unconsciously in congruence or incongruence to the workgroup with the task to reduce anxiety in order to survive. Anxiety is defined as the system's unconscious driving force to contain the fear of the future (Huffington *et al.*, 2004). Anxiety acts as the driving force in the systems' unconscious and could manifest as free-floating (a pervasive unrealistic expectation unattached to a clearly formulated concept or object of fear), survival (the assumption that existence is threatened), performance (the assumption that one's worth is lower than what is believed at the time) and paranoid anxiety (based on the belief in a potentially harming enemy) (Farlex Medical Dictionary, 2015; Menzies, 1993; Schein, 2009; Sievers, 2009). Anxiety causes psychic pain which could manifest in, for example, the fear of losing control. Consequently, the system defends against the pain (Sievers, 2009). This is described as the paranoid-schizoid position (Klein, 1975) where the system experiences anxiety stimulated by rigidity in thinking, fear of the unknown and of persecution, and fantasies of grandiosity (Krantz, 2001), which is defended against through splitting, projection, projective identification and idealisation (Blackman, 2004). If the system can process the anxiety effectively towards the integration of its good and bad parts into a whole object and dismiss the belief in the idealised object, it moves to the depressive position (Klein, 1975) where the system can own its real behaviour and repair its object and human relations (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004).

The basic assumption group's behaviour manifests in various assumptions in service of reducing and containing anxiety: (1) Dependence manifests in employees' relatedness to an imaginative caring parental figure (Campbell, 2007). When these needs are not met, employees experience insecurity, anxiety and de-authorisation (Czander, 1993). In such a dependent system, employees become overly reliant upon each other, and the system as representatives of authority figures in the system (Van der Toorn, Tyler & Jost, 2011). When authority figures fail to meet employees' needs, failed dependency is prevalent (Huffington *et al.*, 2004); (2) Pairing

refers to employees' collective unconscious anxiety related to creativity and succession. It manifests as the pairing up of perceived powerful objects based on the hopeful wish for the birth of a saviour to take the psychic pain away (Bion, 1961; Colman & Bexton, 1975; Lawrence, Bain & Gould, 1996); (3) Fight or flight manifests as fighting against or flight away from an imagined enemy (the enemy in the mind) (Bion, 1961; Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004); (4) One-ness or we-ness manifests when employees surrender their individuality and psychologically join in an imaginary powerful union with an omnipotent force in order to experience well-being and wholeness (Turquet, 1974); (5) Me-ness is seen as an adaptive defence manifesting when individual employees experience their group's behaviour or influence as threatening and intimidating. Individuals then denounce (or detach from) their group affiliation and depend on their individuality and self-reliance to cope with their emotional demands (Huffington *et al.*, 2004; Lawrence *et al.*, 1996).

The most prominent systems psychodynamic behavioural constructs to explain employee's experiences of organisational phenomena such as transformation are conflict, task, role, boundary, authority and identity (referred to in a different order as the CIBART model – Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005) and containment (Bion, 1984). Conflict arises because of the unconscious anxiety inherent in the workplace and employees' exposure to the good and bad parts of the system (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005). Task is the basic building block of work. Employees may be involved in primary and secondary task functioning as well as off-task and anti-task behaviour (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004). Role refers to the boundary around a set of tasks, duties and responsibilities on a specific level of authority and manifests as the normative (the conscious and explicit content), the existential (the employee's introjected past experiences and personality traits such as values and preferences) and the phenomenal part (the projections that the employee receives from significant others in the organisational system) (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004; Czander, 1993; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994). Boundary refers to the line around and space between the individual's and other employees' roles in service of emotional protection and containment (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005). Authority refers to the right to perform the primary task as officially sanctioned by the system represented by leaders from above, colleagues from the side, subordinates from below and by employees themselves from within (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005). Identity refers to the integration of the above – the system's uniqueness through its psychological characteristics (Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006; Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004). Containment is seen as the most crucial condition for transformation to be effective in any system (Clarke, Hahn & Hoggett, 2008; Zinkin, 1989) moving from elementary to integrated complexity thinking. Traditionally, the organisational system (leadership, teams and operations) is seen as the containers of transformational anxiety containing the employees (the contained) who need to adjust to different forms of newness and the anxiety it represents. Leadership needs to be authorised in their roles to manage the transformational boundaries in: (1) holding the system



together to facilitate productive interaction; (2) changing the container from without in order to transform the contained (by for example facilitating changes in structures, people's positions, procedures and systems while staying mindful of employees' need for stability, consistency, homeostasis and reliability as well as their excitement of novelty, surprise and curiosity); (3) changing the system from within meaning that employees inevitably take responsibility to alter the system they belong to; (4) allowing the reciprocity between container and contained in the realisation that there is no fixed container holding the contained and that the contained themselves increasingly bring about change to the container, which brings OT into being, in an open systems manner (Von Bertalanffy, 1968); and (5) to instead of the natural style of male penetration with interpretations to overcoming RTC rather compensate with maternal values of holding, supporting, nourishing and promoting growth. Such transformation of a system as a container can be understood by leadership through attending to employee's dreams, fantasies, myths, paradoxes, ambiguities and other illogicalities without memory, desire or judgement.

## Research question, research objectives and value-add of the study

The research question was formulated as follows: what systems psychodynamic behaviours does support staff in a government organisation experience during OT that could assist in the understanding of their psychological position? The research objective was to study and describe the manifesting systems psychodynamic behaviour amongst support staff during OT. The potential value-add of the study lies in creating a depth psychology awareness of OT experiences, specifically about the nature and intensity of anxiety and its defensive structures. In terms of the sample, this study provides data never before researched on the OT experiences of administrative, non-managerial support staff in a government organisation.

## Research design

### Research approach

Systems psychodynamics served as the theoretical paradigm. Qualitative and descriptive research (Wilson & Maclean, 2011) within the phenomenological hermeneutic stance (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009) was conducted. The ontological assumption was that employees' experiences and interactions are part of their subjective reality resulting from prolonged and intimate processes of construction and negotiation in the organisational culture. The epistemological assumption was that the expression of their experiences can be understood through interaction, empathetic listening and respectful interpretation (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006).

### Research strategy

Support staff members who have experienced OT were approached for data gathering. Individual data were analysed

followed by a search for collective patterns of similarity and variance and then integrated and interpreted for the whole according to the systems psychodynamic stance (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006).

## Research method

### The research setting

The research was set in a government organisation in South Africa in the business of creating sustainable social programmes. Twelve years in operation in South Africa, the organisation comprised of 67 staff members. A sharp decline in funding and downward performance projections triggered the organisation to transform its operational processes, procedures, controls and structures on a large scale. The OT type was framed as restructuring, where the scope is organisational and the type of change focuses on job content and reporting structures (Viljoen, 2015). In this OT type, change and transformation management inputs are seen as very important (French & Bell, 1999), although they were not consciously planned for or their impact facilitated by the organisation.

### Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The first researcher's entrée into the research domain was facilitated by his role in the organisation as Staff Development Specialist responsible for staff well-being. He took up the role of participant observer (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006) where the research commitment was identified as observing known colleagues, which eased the entry into the research domain, trying to understand the domain from the inside out, using specific questions and field notes focused on the research question and being open to unexpected information. He took responsibility for the scientific and ethical execution of the research, specifically the interview data collection and analysis. The second author assisted in the data interpretation and took up the role of research supervisor.

### Data collection method

A 2 h interactive interview (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009) was constructed consisting of open questions to open dialogue. A three part opening question was used, namely: During this time of transformation: (1) *How do you experience the organisation and its people*, (2) *How do you experience yourself in your organisational role* and (3) *How do you experience the current changes in the organisation?* Part 1 was designed to focus on OT information on the macro and meso levels, and it was believed that this would be a relative safe topic to start the interview with. Part 2 focused on the micro level where participants could explore their individual and personal experiences. Part 3 focused on the nature and impact of the transformation. All follow-up questions were based on the interactive interviewing principle that both interviewer and participant can create the capacity as a container to hold the generation of understanding (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). This implies listening to unconscious thoughts and feelings as well as the implicit – what is not being said. This includes the 'unspeakable' that participants will not openly share in the work situation.

## Sampling

From the population of 10 support staff, the sampling was performed in a non-probability, purposive manner (Brewerton & Millward, 2004) using sampling to redundancy (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). The sample size was not decided on in advance. The data gathering ended once saturation and the re-occurrence of themes manifested. The interviews were sequenced to represent the gender, age and race composition of the organisation. During the analysis, the data reached saturation after the interview with the fourth participant (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). The small sample is justified in the strong body of existing theory, the interpretive and constructionist stance and the in-depth nature of systems psychodynamics as paradigm. The sample of four individuals consisted of three women (two Black, one White) and one Black male. Ages ranged from late 20s to late 40s, and the average tenure in the organisation was 10 years.

## Recording of data

Audio-recording and researcher note-taking (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006) were used. Both sets of data were transcribed into a Word document and were collectively used as the protocol for analysis.

## Data analysis

The hermeneutic approach was applied with simple hermeneutics used to read through, order and understand the transcribed data (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). By reading through the transcribed data several times, the researcher was able to gain a sense of the whole (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). Next, a content analysis of the latent, underlying meaning of the text was performed (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Corresponding themes and patterns of meaning emerged, which was highlighted in all four interviews. Double hermeneutics was used to interpret the data and the context of the research from the systems psychodynamic stance. The hermeneutic circle was applied to interpret individual (micro), group (meso) and organisational (macro) behaviour separately followed by a holistic interpretation of all four cases (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). Triple hermeneutics was used in reflecting and documenting the researchers' responses in terms of transferences and counter-transferences and how the research and researcher co-informed one another (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009).

## Strategies employed to ensure quality data

The research was planned and executed towards ensuring scientific rigour and trustworthiness. Dependability was ensured by gathering the data within one research stance and interpreting it from one comprehensive theoretical stance (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Credibility was ensured through authorised involvement of all parties and in-depth discussions between the researchers (Hirschhorn, 1997). Internal generalisability and confirmability were attended to through theoretical reviews, awareness of researcher preconceptions, biases, subjectivity, anxieties, attestation of findings, interpretations and recommendations through the

use of theoretical data. Supervision and regular discussions (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpont, 2002) gave evidence of dependability, replicability and richness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Transferability was achieved through the maintenance of a focused theoretical and paradigmatic framework, purposive sampling and detailed data description of experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

## Ethical considerations

Ethicality was ensured through the permission granted from the organisation's Director, the University authorities (represented by the second researcher as supervisor) and participants' informed consent (De Vos *et al.*, 2002).

## Reporting

The findings are reported in terms of participant responses to the parts of the interview question, the research themes and the researcher's experiences. In the discussion, the data are interpreted according to the manifesting systems psychodynamic basic assumptions and CIBART constructs. Lastly, the conclusion, limitations and recommendations are formulated.

## Findings

Responses on part 1 of the interview question (*How do you experience the organisation and its people?*) brought participants' persecutory anxiety to the fore and how they experienced being reprimanded by the macro organisational system as an angry authoritarian parent. Responses on part 2 (*How do you experience yourself in your organisational role?*) revealed participants' free-floating anxiety that manifested in their self-de-authorisation and regression into subordination and helplessness. They rationalised their position through blaming the system of creating uncertainty and unclear boundaries. Responses on part 3 (*How do you experience the current changes in the organisation?*) revealed participants' high levels of survival anxiety. Their defence was to split the good from the bad, introject the good in order to cope with the often overwhelming demands of moving forward and project the bad immobilising anxiety onto leadership's OT efforts. This was interpreted that participants experienced high levels of free-floating, survival and persecutory anxiety (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004) typical of what is theoretically expected during OT when there is no psychological container offered to process their experiences towards individual and systemic understanding (Diamond & Allcorn, 2009). The following content themes manifested.

## De-authorisation and detachment

Participants started by cognitively and positively describing OT as:

'measures that have to be taken' [P4, female, 28].

Thereafter, they started sharing affective and negative experiences, describing OT as something:

'unfortunate' and 'dangerous' ('once it builds up, and once it is at a fire stage') [P4, female, 28]

that will get out of control:

- 'it is very hard and difficult to control the fire' [P4, female, 28];
- 'I can tell the paw-paw is going to hit the fan pretty soon' [P4, female, 28].

They experienced the demands of OT as de-authorising – their work roles and identities became increasingly unclear:

- 'not having a set job title or role' [P1, female, 37],

their tasks were:

- 'not always within my powers' [P4, female, 28]

and:

- 'not within my reach' [P4, female, 28]

As defence against this free-floating anxiety (Sher, 2013), they used emotional and task detachment:

- 'you have to remove yourself from the situation' [P1, female, procurement assistant, 37]
- 'I don't want to be involved ... unless I am required to do so' [P4, female, 28]
- 'there are things that you could actually avoid' [P4, female, 28]

The above was interpreted as participants relinquishing their task and their emotional attachment:

- 'there are limits to what we can do.' [P2, female, 48]

## Being bullied and seduced by leadership

Participants blamed their leaders for introducing OT into the organisation and becoming cold, unapproachable and withholding key information. Participants experienced being disconnected from leadership; they avoided interaction with them, dissociated from and impersonalised them (referring to 'them' and 'they', not by name). This left the participants with conflict, ambiguity [P1], frustration [P3] and anger [P4]. Then, an interesting shift occurred which was interpreted as participants' survival anxiety manifesting. They started to nervously voice their vulnerability, suspicion and fear of persecution in case they would speak out and express their negative experiences. Two participants, while actually sharing being victims of persecution, in flow changed their stories to being 'extremely optimistic' about an 'idyllic' future [P1]. They referred to, trying to 'represent my supervisor', to follow the 'superior authority' and to see where 'we were missing it' [P4]. This sudden censoring of stories was interpreted as participants being bullied by leadership (Cilliers, 2012) with reference to the use of power to instil fear leading to adjustments in behaviour. As victims they were unconsciously emotionally seduced by leadership to deny their real experiences and to take up the ego state position of the adapted child (Fowlie & Sills, 2011) where they idealised the bully and adjusted their behaviour to ensure their own safety, survival and sanity. Participants started to claim their individuality in describing their experiences, talking in non-specific and abstract terms:

- 'this is just my point of view' [P2, female, 48]
- 'I'm not talking about all the others' [P2, female, 48]
- 'I can only talk from what I see' [P2, female, 48]
- 'I cannot talk on behalf of everyone else' [P2, female, 48]

This was interpreted that the bullying was effective in isolating individuals from one another in the fantasy that they will not know about one another's bad experiences (Cilliers, 2012).

## The organisation in the mind as incompetent

Participants experienced the organisation as incompetent:

- 'out of control' [P4, female, 28]

and a place that have changed into:

- 'a very different organisation' [P2, female, 48]

who:

- 'manages the transition' [P3, male, 41]

without direction they:

- 'keep on hiring new staff every day' [P3, male, 41];

staff:

- 'come and leave.' [P4, female, 28]

This was interpreted as participants' fear and anger directed at the bullying leadership, being defended against through avoidance, deflection and projection (Blackman, 2004) onto the organisation as an inanimate object in their minds acting as a safe container of their anxiety. This is referred to as the organisation in the mind (Campbell & Huffington, 2008). It was further interpreted that participants unconsciously realised and acknowledged that leadership was incompetent in managing transformation. Because of being bullied, the fear of persecution and yet survive in the unsafe system, they had to hold onto their idealisation of leadership as competent.

## A dangerous and persecutory system

Added to the above incompetence, participants experienced the organisation as dangerous – an angry, hostile, intimidating and oppressive authority figure (Hirschhorn, 1997). They expressed fear of openness:

- 'I'm scared to ask' [P2, female, 48],

losing their jobs:

- 'some of us won't have anything to do' [P3, male, 41]

and emotional well-being:

- '... could even go to a state of depression.' [P3, male, 41]

They often used flight into the past representing the known way of dealing with organisational demands and into the



future representing their idealised survival. This was interpreted as participants' anxiety about personal, emotional and positional survival being blamed on the organisation as the enemy (Freud, 1921).

## Researcher's experiences

As colleague in the same organisation, the first researcher had similar experiences of OT than the participants. In preparing and conducting the interviews and interpreting the data, he regularly thought about the possibility of over-identifying and projecting his own anxieties onto his colleagues. In the processing events between both researchers, they realised that he needed to stay in role, authorised, responsible, impartial, mindful and empathic towards his task. At the same time, it cannot be denied that the participants perceived him as 'part of the organisation'. He was especially aware of this when participants implied being bullied by leadership. It was interpreted that his role created conflict amongst participants between him as representative of leadership or their rescuer who can make things better for them. In his role as Staff Development Specialist responsible for staff well-being, the first researcher experienced disappointment at the intensity of the findings. He felt responsible for the success of OT followed by a sense of loss for opportunities not used successfully since the start of the OT process. The above intersubjective nature of the relationship between participants and the researcher as participant observer was interpreted as follows. The researcher represented the bad object (Klein, 1975) or enemy (Freud, 1921) in the interviews as an extension of the persecutory system. The evidence suggested that they used the researcher as a more available bad object who was at least willing to speak to them. The first researcher's feelings of responsibility and regret indicated that he carried the disappointment and perhaps hurt on behalf of the system. This dynamic can be seen as the participants' projections into the researcher as well as his counter transference on participants' blaming of the system (Klein, 1952).

## Discussion

The research objective was to study and describe the manifesting systems psychodynamic behaviour amongst support staff during OT.

Consciously, support staff experienced conflict (about whether transformation was necessary and worth the emotional risk involved) and strong feelings of frustration, stuckness, anger, fear and hurt as expected according to change and transformation theory (Henderson & Boje, 2015; Jabri, 2015). Unconsciously they expressed free-floating, survival, paranoid and persecutory anxiety which they defended against by using various primitive and sophisticated defensive structures – splitting (the good self from the bad other, leadership and the organisation), regression into childlike behaviour, denial of being bullied, suppression of their aggression towards leadership, projection of their fears onto leadership and the organisation, and rationalisation of the intensity of the situation. These experiences are congruent to what the systems psychodynamic literature describes as symptomatic of being

exposed to intense change in life (Czander, 1993; Diamond & Allcorn, 2009) as well as in the organisational system domain of transformation (Bain, 1998). Their RTC indicated their strong sense of loss of their previous way of working in the organisation, their primary task as they saw it, the way they took up their roles in their relatedness with colleagues, their known self-perception and their experiences of the organisational culture. It also indicates that OT represented a daunting unknown to them (Kets de Vries *et al.*, 2007) and maybe a realisation that what they thought they had was only a fantasy (Huffington *et al.*, 2004).

In terms of the basic assumptions, the following interpretations were made. They expressed their dependence on a supportive leadership structure, and because this did not manifest, they expressed their counter-dependence on the organisation. They tried to pair with leadership which turned out to be in the role of victim towards a bully – this placed them in a masochistic position (Czander, 1993). Their fight responses indicated their anxiety about an impending doom (Krantz, 2001) and their flight responses indicated the strength of their paranoid anxiety where the individual is of less importance than the preservation of the group (Bion, 1961). Their one-ness illustrated the intensity of OT experienced as a threat that support staff needed to relinquish their individuality for the sake of survival within the organisational system (Lawrence *et al.*, 1996). Their me-ness illustrated the intensity of their survival anxiety where safety lies in their detachment from the struggle. The above was interpreted as to how support staff found itself in the paranoid-schizoid position in order to cope with OT and its management by a distrusted and failed leadership (Clarke *et al.*, 2008).

In terms of the CIBART constructs, support staff experienced conflict between the past (old and known) and the present (new, unknown and threatening) as well as how they knew themselves to be in the system versus what OT expects them to do and be. Their coping with conflict consisted of avoidance and a tendency to rather stay in the background and to do 'fire-fighting'. Their primary task was under attack which leads to off-task behaviour – which was mostly to survive the OT demands. Because of the high levels of anxiety, their normative role became unclear, their existential roles became confused because of the transference (Klein, 1952) of previous poor authority relationships interfering with their experiences of leadership, and their phenomenal roles took in the projections of the larger system about being a rebellious child and thus not-good-enough for this new organisation (Campbell & Huffington, 2008; Sievers, 2009; Stapley, 2006). Their time and ego boundaries were under attack which caused so much anxiety that they could not work with what OT was expecting from them. Their experience was that the system and leadership de-authorised them in such a manner that they could not cope rationally any more. Because of the high levels of anxiety and their relative low position in the organisation they struggled to self-authorise (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004). The above was interpreted that support staff could not stay on task, rational in taking up their organisational roles, manage their boundaries and be

authorised, because in this OT situation leadership could not hold the organisation together, transform it from without or within, or move away from its over-bounded-ness, as it was managing this complex process from a male (penetrating) style instead of listening with understanding and empathy to staff's experiences from a maternal position (Baumeister & Tice, 1990).

In terms of containment, OT did not offer a potential holding and safe space for support staff to take up their organisational role in a rational manner in order to cope with the demands of the unknown associated with transformation, such as to move from elementary to integrated complex thinking (Van Eeden & Cilliers, 2009). Although this study does not give direct evidence of the OT experiences of other staff members in the organisation, their systemic and unconscious relatedness to support staff as those lower on the leadership hierarchy could be hypothesised about. The evidence suggests that through projection and projective identification, support staff was used (scapegoated, bullied and maybe seduced) as a subsystem by OT as an object, to contain and act out the systemic child behaviour resisting and rebelling against the unavailable and unattentive parents, thus expressing the total systemic discontent and anxiety on behalf of everyone. If so, the interpretation could be made that this organisational system used support staff to experience the systemic stuckness (in the anal manner) (Freud, 1921) which could allow other parts of the system to move, grow and have a more positive experience of OT.

This study did not measure the effectiveness of the OT project. Yet, in terms of leadership behaviour during the process, the evidence suggests a lack of transformational behaviour on the meso level (Van Eeden & Cilliers, 2009). Support staff did not report on experiences of personal identification with their leaders, a shared vision of the future, attitudes and behaviours that reflect higher-order needs, or being aware of the importance and interdependence of their tasks and roles. Also, their leaders did not illustrate any of the transformational characteristics of intellectual stimulation, idealised influence, inspirational motivation or individualised consideration. It was interpreted that instead of the OT process implemented by the organisation acting as a transitional object (Klein, 1975) for organisational growth and wellness, it was overwhelmed by the complexity of the human aspect of transformation. This hindered support staff members' thinking or mind-set to move to integration and their feelings to be attended to with empathy and respect.

## Conclusion

It was concluded that support staff experienced, contained and acted out (some of) the negative and even toxic aspects of OT (maybe) on behalf of the total organisational system. This placed them in a psychological position where they overwhelmingly experienced negative feelings, high levels of anxiety and an array of defensive structures, and were inhibited in their personal and interpersonal functioning. They held leadership and the organisation responsible for

their experienced position. Although this may be seen as a normal and initial OT dynamic, this system got stuck here because leadership could not contain the aggression through listening or attending to the systemic behaviours (which also belongs to them). Instead, they detached themselves in a superior (bullying) manner to maintain the split in the system between its good and bad parts which kept the OT initiative divided and toxic.

The value-add of this study lies in creating a depth psychology awareness of OT experiences, specifically about the nature and intensity of anxiety, its defensive structures and the way containment is not provided. In terms of the sample, this study provides data never before researched on the OT experiences of administrative, non-managerial support staff in a government organisation.

The limitations of this study stem from the limited sample, specific population and the macro environment it operates in. Although reflective of the demographics of the organisation, the sample composition does not necessarily reflect that of the broader 'government institution' population. The researchers suggest that the findings may at least be transferable (as explained by Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006) to similar government organisations during transformation.

For this organisation, it was recommended that leadership is allowed to process the findings in a facilitated session to ensure their understanding of and insight into the unconscious dynamics as 'no-one's fault' (to account for their defences and possibly their guilt and shame). The outcome of this kind of session could be framed as the reparation of relationships and a review of the OT process and its effect. It was also recommended that future research focuses on the systems psychodynamics of other organisational levels relative to one another to address the systemic relatedness during OT.

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### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

The study was initiated by M.S. who also did the literature review and empirical study. F.C. acted as supervisor of the study and assisted in the refining and formulation of the themes and the discussion.

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