Emotion, learning and organizing

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ABSTRACT

Far from being emotional deserts, organizations are full of emotion and passion. Increasingly, management has sought to harness emotion to increase work motivation, enhance customer service and work performance and the "emotional intelligence" advocates have sought to develop a toolkit for the smarter deployment of emotions in organizations. Using social constructionist and psychoanalytic ideas, the author argues that the management of emotions is problematic and precarious. Some emotions may be contained or re-directed, but many arise from deeper unconscious sources and are impervious to learning. Two specific emotions, anxiety and love, are discussed.

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Intellect and emotion have long stood at opposite ends of philosophical conceptions of human beings. The period of history frequently described as modernity, which reached its apogee in the twentieth century, has long been seen as one that marked the ascendancy of rational, calculating, intellectual human at the expense of passionate, emotional, impulsive one. Following the great German sociologist Max Weber, organizations, as chief institutions of modernity, were seen as essentially rational instruments for the achievement of administrative, business and technical ends. Calculation, knowledge, careful planning were meant to drive personal feeling, impulsive action and traditional ways of doing things increasingly out. It is not that organizations were meant to be emotion-free zones, but rather they were meant to be zones in which business was conducted according to rational plans and

calculations.
How curious then it is to reflect that the twentieth century was characterized by some of the most extraordinary and costly experiments in human irrationality. Equally, how curious it is to discover that as the century drew to its close, there was hardly an area of organizational life which was not being re-thought as being saturated with emotion, passion and fantasy. Leadership, for example, was now seen increasingly as acting on people's emotions and passions through visions and missions; innovation was seen as depending crucially on a passionate thirst for the new and disenchantment with the old; customer service was seen as relying on emotional rapport and friendly smiles as much as on professional competence and expertise.
Increasing amounts of work that all of us do in and out of organizations involve the reading of other people's emotions and the display and expression of suitable emotions by ourselves. Emotional intelligence and emotional labour are terms which have rapidly become common-place in management-speak, and for very good reasons. Far from being emotional deserts, organizations are rapidly being reconfigured as arenas for the deployment, management and resourcing of human emotion.
One aspect of organizational life that is being reconfigured as a consequence is learning, at individual, group and organizational levels. It is now rapidly recognized that learning is not a pure cognitive process, a process involving solely the brain. It is also an emotional process-- learning under the guidance of a loved teacher or a respected manager is different from learning in the presence of a hated teacher or a cynical supervisor. Learning as part of an exciting group is different from learning in a group riven with rivalries and acrimony. Learning in an organization which allows experimentation, innovation and failure is different from learning in an organization that values tradition, obedience and avoidance of failure at all costs. It is not the case that cynical managers, acrimonious groups and defensive organizations discourage learning. Far from it. What they do is to encourage a kind of learning that promotes defensive attitudes, conservatism and destruction of all new ideas as potentially threatening and subversive.
Emotions then are now being recognized as an inevitable feature of organizational life. But what are the main theoretical tools for understanding emotions, making sense of them and, maybe, guiding them, taming them and civilizing them? In this article we shall briefly introduce two approaches, the emotional intelligence approach and the social constructionist approach, before introducing in greater detail some of the strengths of a psychoanalytic approach to the study of organizational emotion.
Undoubtedly the most popular current approach among managers, consultants and practitioners centers on the idea of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 1998, 2001; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). This has emerged as the latest managerial fad, spawning a veritable cottage industry of gurus, publications, gizmos and buzz-words - even a superficial search on the Internet reveals armies of consultants offering to increase the emotional intelligence of the businessperson and his or her staff.
Behind the hype, the emotional intelligence enthusiasts have proposed a number of ideas on emotions drawing from brain, behavioural and psychoanalytic research and framed them in the language of management learning and customer care. Notable among them, are the following:
* Many types of work in today's organizations depend crucially on emotional skills, such as empathy, sensitivity to the feelings of others, anger and emotion management, self-awareness and so forth.
* These skills are part of an entity which can be seen as emotional literacy or emotional intelligence, which individuals acquire to different extents in early life and develop subsequently.
* Emotional intelligence can be quantified and individuals with higher emotional intelligence are better able to lead others, strike deals, handle relationships or sell products, through intelligent deployment of their own emotions and the management and exploitation of the emotions of others.
* Unlike intellectual intelligence which is immune to improvement, emotional intelligence is uniquely suited to being developed and enhanced through sensitivity packages, role play and other types of training.
* If emotional intelligence can be learned, learning itself is conditioned by emotional intelligence, for instance, in the ability to sustain motivation, to control disappointment, to tame anxiety, and to form emotional relations with

people capable of teaching.
These ideas have undoubtedly gained much currency in the last five years, not least because they meet most practitioners' impulsive attraction towards anything that can be readily applied. And there can be little doubt that they have found numerous applications that have proven effective. However, the effectiveness of management ideas is not always proof of their soundness and rigour - they can equally be the result of chance, circumstance or the emotional needs of those adopting them. Among academics, the concept of emotional intelligence has come under serious critical scrutiny. Thus Fineman (2000a,b), in a trenchant critique of this approach, argues that emotional intelligence represents an attempt to quantify and tame emotion, making it the servant of the organization's bottom line. As if not content to control individuals' movements, behaviour and appearance, organizations seek to control the ways they feel and the ways they express their feelings. Some feelings are appropriated and developed, in as much as they help the organization - empathy, hope, excitement, pride and so forth. Others, like greed, envy, anger and disgust, are controlled and repressed. In all these ways, emotional intelligence enthusiasts, while claiming to liberate emotion, seek to subordinate it to reason and in particular the instrumental reason of business and organizations.
Maybe the popularization of emotional intelligence gives us cause to celebrate - it brings emotion out of the organizational closet. But it also captures and simplifies emotion. In particular: it determines a moral order of emotions where "highly" emotionally intelligent individuals are judged as more organizationally worthy than those of "low" emotional intelligence (echoing debates on the tyranny of IQ); it creates a dependence on the emotion consultant and his/her values, questionnaires and training courses; and it misleadingly assumes that we can readily identify, sift and select "appropriate" emotions (Fineman, 2000b, p. 17).
Can emotions then become such loyal and dependable organizational servants as the emotional intelligence advocates would have us believe? Social construction theorists have, for the past 20 years or so, argued that emotions are learned not in accordance with managerial dictates, but as a way of making sense of social situations and functioning effectively in them. Seen from the social constructionist perspective (Kemper, 1978; Averill, 1980; Harre, 1986; Fineman, 1993, 1997; Mangham, 1998), emotion guides the individual in appraising social situations and responding to them. This places emotion firmly in a social context and emphasizes emotional display as part of an inter-personal, meaning-creating process. Emotions can be pleasant and exciting (positive) or unpleasant and disturbing (negative) depending on interpretations given by individuals and tested through their relations with others. In this way, they function to preserve what a person values in different circumstances, while at the same time signalling the need for change (Lazarus, 1991).
Of paramount importance in constructionist approaches to emotion are the following ideas:
* Emotions are social phenomena; in contrast to feelings which are personal responses to social interactions, emotions are culturally shaped - thus, people learn to experience grief at funerals and excitement in theme park rides.
* Emotions are constituted in the act of description through language and enacted in the presence of audiences. Audience is paramount. Social and cultural contexts provide the rules, scripts and vocabularies of emotional display for different audiences: self, loved one, boss, subordinate etc.
* Emotions are learned aspects of behaviour and are situation-specific; they are instrumental in defining relations of deference, position, status and authority;
* Emotions are generally not irrational but quite practical; in many instances, they represent conscious judgements aimed at bringing about specific outcomes.
* Emotion labour represents the psychological work expended in reconciling personal feelings with socially sanctioned displays of emotion (adapted from Fineman and Gabriel, 2000).
According to social constructionist approaches, individuals may adopt certain emotional responses (smiling, nodding, expressing interest or concern) in work situations, but these responses are far from simple expressions of emotional intelligence. They simply represent a form of compliance to management dictates, which often turn into cynicism or snarling when their superiors are not looking (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Sturdy, 1998). Nor are

these emotional responses without a cost; they take a toll on the employee who may experience feelings of alienation and inauthenticity occasionally leading to breakdown or bum-out. It is here that psychoanalytic approaches to emotion can make a very valuable contribution.

Psychoanalysis approaches emotion, like social constructionist approaches, as a fundamental motivational principle in human affairs. Like social constructionist approaches, psychoanalysis dismisses the view that emotion can be quantified within a unified category such as emotional intelligence or that it can be deployed unproblematically in the interest of organizations. However, the two approaches diverge in a number of important respects. Psychoanalytic approaches:

* Regard emotion and rationality as motivational principles in conflict, at least some of the time. Thus, rationalization is a key defensive mechanism whereby rational explanations obfuscate troublesome emotional motives.
* Emphasize the mobility and plasticity of emotions, not in response to external factors, but as a consequence of psychological work. Thus envy can easily be transformed to anger, which in turn may give way to guilt, which may manifest itself in attempts to console and repair. From a psychoanalytic perspective, emotions are not just "movers" (from emovere) but also in motion; it is rare to capture an emotion in a steady state (as when we talk of "consuming emotions"); frequently, the act of capturing the emotion instantly leads to its transformation.

Stress the quality of ambivalence in most important emotions; thus hate is rarely encountered unadulterated by love, envy by fascination, anger by guilt and fear by attraction.

* Stress that emotion work is not merely external (i.e. reconciling feelings to the requirements of social situations) but also internal, that is in coping with conflicts, contradictions and ambivalences and keeping some sense of order in potentially chaotic emotional states.
* Persist against much opposition that there is a quantitative aspect to emotion; some emotions, such as mild envy or disappointment, may be held at bay by countervailing stronger emotions, though unopposed powerful emotions almost invariably lead either to discharge (through verbal or physical actions which have counter-productive or damaging consequences) or to defensive operations which lead to their neutralization or repression, (adapted from Fineman and Gabriel, 2000; Antonacopoulou and Gabriel, 2001).

Above all, however, psychoanalytic approaches insist that there is a primitive, pre-- linguistic, pre-cognitive and pre-social level of emotions, an inner world of passion, ambivalence and contradiction which may be experienced or repressed, expressed or controlled, diffused or diluted, but never actually obliterated. As Craib (1998, p. 110) has argued:

If we think of emotions as having a life of their own, which might be in contradiction to, or expressed fully or partially through our cognition to different degrees in different times, we can think through all sorts of situations with which most people must be familiar: experiencing feelings we cannot express to our satisfaction; having feelings that we can express but that others find difficult to understand; and most important perhaps, the regular experience of contradictions between our thoughts and our feelings.

In this sense, they maintain the core feature of the ancient Greek word for emotion, pathos, an experience which is not willed, controlled or judged, but rather suffered, coped with and submitted to. Thus, at the cost of some simplification, while social constructionists view emotion as derivative of social scripts, signs and scenarios in which we become linguistically enmeshed, psychoanalytic approaches view emotions as generating scripts, signs and scenarios. Where, for instance, the former will identify anger as consequent of a situation read as insult, the latter will view the experience of being insulted as derivative of a deeper anger and resentment (Gabriel, 1998).

The distinguishing feature of psychoanalysis is the assumption of an unconscious dimension to social and individual life, one in which both ideas and emotions may operate (Freud, 1986). The unconscious is not merely part of a psychic reality which happens to be concealed from consciousness, but functions both as a mental territory in which dangerous and painful ideas are consigned through repression and other defensive mechanisms, and also as a source of resistances to specific ideas and emotions which present threats to mental functioning (Freud, 1988). Unconscious ideas, desires and emotions will often reach consciousness in highly distorted,

camouflaged or abstruse ways, requiring interpretation (Freud, 1984). Nor is the unconscious a marginal or pathological terrain into which we occasionally venture. Psychoanalysis views a substantial part of human motivation and action as unconsciously driven. Even where plausible conscious reasons and explanations are given for an action, a desire or a thought, psychoanalysis will examine the possibility that unconscious factors are at play.

It would then be fair to say that if emotional intelligence theorists view organizations as machines for the control and deployment of emotions and social constructionists view them as emotional arenas where emotions are performed in front of audiences, psychoanalytic authors view organizations as emotional cauldrons where fantasies, desires and passions lead a precarious co-existence with plans, calculations and the application of scientific thinking. What are the implications of such an approach? In the first place, we are made to suspect the operation of unconscious motives when things go right, but even more when things go wrong. When communication breaks down, when mistakes are repeated, when warnings go unheeded, when patently disastrous decisions are unanimously endorsed, when interpersonal rivalries threaten to derail organizational functioning, when pride turns into blind adulation of the organization and feelings of invulnerability-- in these situations, we suspect that powerful unconscious forces are at work. To argue that people should learn from such mistakes and misfortunes is to ignore those unconscious forces which blind us to the mistakes and misfortunes in the first place.

Thus, a significant departure of psychoanalysis from other approaches concerns the relative imperviousness of certain emotions to learning. This is especially pronounced and damaging in serious cases of neurosis, where for instance suspicion, hate, love and fear aimed at particular individuals or aroused by particular situations refuse to be altered or tempered, irrespective of the pain which they cause or the strength of the evidence against their justification. Yet, a fundamental principle of psychoanalysis is that there is no hard and fast line between normality and neurosis, since all normal individuals display certain processes and characteristics which are virtually indistinguishable from those of neurotics. The neurotic may be more incapacitated by his/her predicament, may be more severely afflicted by anxiety or may display more irrational symptoms, yet the underlying psychological processes of defenses and resistances are indistinguishable from those of "normal" individuals (Gabriel, 1999). It is normal then that some of the emotions of all of us are and remain impervious to attempts to temper them, modify them, civilize them, in short, to manage them. This is especially so with emotions which left a deep mark in our early lives, becoming parts of our character structure. Different psychological characters feature certain consistent repertoires of emotional responses, notable in periods of uncertainty and trauma, which are difficult to modify through subsequent learning. Thus, an obsessive character's anxiety when confronted with disorder will be as resistant to modification by learning as a narcissistic character's craving for approval and admiration, or a heroic character's guilt when facing failure (Gabriel and Schwartz, 1999). This shows some of the limits in developing or modifying emotions through learning.

What can psychoanalysis offer the manager and the leader of organizations?

The first thing then that psychoanalysis can teach leaders and managers is that they too (along with their subordinates, customers and others) are emotional beings, using unconscious defences to fend off unpleasant desires and feelings. Two particular sets of symptoms must be noted, narcissism and authoritarianism, both of which easily afflict people in positions of power and respect. Narcissism is a normal and desirable condition which ensures that at least some of each individual's emotional energy is lavished on the ego and supports the individual's healthy self-esteem and pride. Leaders inevitably have a strong narcissism, relishing the attention and respect of others and seeking distinction and achievement. All too easily, however, narcissism becomes derailed - leaders wish to be admired simply for who they are and for the power they hold rather than for the results they are delivering. This is especially so in organizations pre-occupied with image, symbolism and public relations, where spin and the management of appearances all too easily replace real work, innovation and entrepreneurship. It is then that narcissism can become quite destructive in organizations - leaders and followers end up as mutual admiration societies, keeping each other happy, but losing sight of threats and opportunities facing their

organization, competitors outperforming it and customers abandoning it. Like spoilt children, such organizations center around the delusion of self-importance and invulnerability to cruel and adverse reality (Maccoby, 2000; Schwartz, 1990).

Authoritarianism is often seen as an affliction standing at the opposite end of narcissism. Where narcissists are often the products of very indulgent parents who lavish much love and attention on their children, authoritarians tend to be individuals who were starved of love in childhood and have an exaggerated respect for power, rules and order. As leaders, they expect unquestioned obedience, they tend to stereotype negatively all opponents and to denigrate anything that is associated with the feminine, the artistic and the sensitive. Under the pretense of extreme rationality, they allow a free reign to emotions of fear, disgust and disdain which are manifested in a cynical attitude to humanity (Adorno et al., 1950). An ultra-- masculine macho quality characterizes such leaders, who will never acknowledge a mistake or the need for a u-turn. They are thus particularly prone to entrapment in situations where good money and resources are thrown after bad. Dixon (1976) has found that authoritarian leaders account for some of the worst military disasters and, undoubtedly, they also account for numerous political and business disasters too. Psychoanalysis can temper leaders' narcissistic and authoritarian tendencies, alerting them to some of the early signs and potential adversities. It is not uncommon these days for senior executives to employ coaches, analysts or counsellors to precisely this end.

A different contribution that psychoanalysis can offer leaders and managers is to sensitize them to the emotional needs of their followers, needs that can easily and unknowingly be frustrated, leaving followers with feelings of betrayal and disappointment. Few leaders are aware of the extraordinary position that they occupy in the emotional and fantasy life of many of their followers-- research by one of the authors in five different organizations suggested that many subordinates are obsessed with their leaders, observing them closely, assessing them continuously and projecting powerful fantasies onto them. Leaders can then be experienced as powerful messiahs or vile impostors, scheming Machiavellians or kindly mother figures, axe-wielding butchers or cunning fixers (Gabriel, 1997). Almost invariably such fantasies (which are expressed in stories, gossip, jokes and so forth) bear little relation with the leaders' real actions, though they reflect closely the emotional needs of followers, such as the need for protection, the need for individual attention, the need for legitimate scapegoats and so forth. Above all, such fantasies express some of the followers' deepest anxieties, and it is here that psychoanalysis can make a significant contribution to the leaders' emotional effects on organizations.

Anxiety is an inevitable part of life in today's organizations. Its sources are diverse and powerful. "Will I have a job next month?", "Will I be able to use the new technology?", "Can I stay with my friends or will my department be restructured?", "Can the organization survive?", "Will my feelings overcome me?"; these are some of the very realistic anxieties that people bring to their workplaces. In addition, they may bring specific anxieties - the nurse may ask "Will I be able to stand the sight of the suffering patient?" The teacher may ask "Will I be able to stay in control of my class?" The manager ask "Will I be able to meet the monthly quota for the current period?" and so forth. Beyond these, we all carry with us deeper irrational anxieties, relating to aging and dying, losing our intellectual or sexual prowess, being victim of violence, failing and letting others down and so forth. How are such anxieties managed?

Organizations deploy a variety of defences against anxiety, i.e. means aimed at "containing" anxiety and stopping it from having incapacitating effects. Some defences consist of placing barriers and boundaries which protect individuals and groups. Others involve rules and regulations aimed at limiting the arbitrariness with which people are treated. Organizations depersonalize relations and create an illusion, if not a reality, of routine and predictability. But the curious consequence of these defensive measures is that they indirectly fuel anxiety. If you are in a city with massive fortifications, these may allay fears of immediate invasion, but they also create a sense of constant exposure and threat and a need for vigilance and wariness. In a similar way, people in organizations, notably in times of change and crisis, experience massive amounts of anxiety, irrespective of defences aimed at containing it.

Leaders can have a considerable effect in the management and containment of anxiety - not by offering false

promises and reassurances, but by mobilizing positive emotions of hope, courage, self-reliance and dedication and so forth. Following the work of the psychoanalyst Winnicot (1962, 1964), leaders must act as "good enough mothers" in their organizations, creating a "holding environment" in which people can work without false safety nets but also without total exposure to every adversity. Anxiety may then be kept within a manageable level - not too high to incapacitate individuals, not too low to lead to complacency. The same management of anxiety is a vital factor in the learning process. Extreme anxiety and learning is disabled; absence of anxiety and learning is uncalled for. Winnicott argued that this holding environment is the environment in which children learn, an environment allowing enough space for experimentation and play, which is safe enough without being stifling or overbearing. The holding environment recreates the experience of the mother's embrace, an embrace which allows the child to realize that he/she has an independent existence in the world, without however exposing her/him directly to the threats engendered by this world. The management of anxiety then becomes seminal in all learning situations, since too much or too little anxiety inhibit learning.

While anxiety is an emotion which can play a determining role in organizations, it should not be privileged above other emotions. In concluding this article, we would like to draw attention to another vital and often unacknowledged emotion in organizations, love. The psychoanalytic conception of love is truly protean, stretching from passionate infatuation with an object to narcissistic self-- love, from sensuous to spiritual, from contemplative to driving and from creative to destructive. Within a clinical relationship, love for the analyst can galvanize a patient's resolve to recover. Love for one's teacher, one's hero or oneself is, likewise, a major stimulant for an individual's learning process. In organizations, love for one's fellow group members, for one's leader, for one's job and for the organization can be of great significance. Although we are often oblivious to such feelings or fail to acknowledge them, they can make a great difference in terms of organizational success. As Sims (2001, p. 11) argued in a recent paper, love in organizations can take many forms:

* Love is being willing to be drained.
* Love is never wanting to miss out on the beloved's stories.
* Love does not work in very small doses.
* Love is not keeping a safe distance between your own story and the beloved's story.
* Love is wanting to write yourself into the beloved's story.
* Love is telling a story which brings your organization to life for everyone else too.
* Love is loving the whole, not the part.
* Love is treating your organization with more respect than you treat yourself.

Of course, just as negative emotions, like anxiety, can have positive effects (e.g. prompting innovation, change and learning), positive emotions, like love, can have negative effects - for example, when they blind us to the organization's evident deficiencies, when they make others take advantage of our love, or when we become accessories to immoral, anti-social or even criminal acts as a result of our feelings for the organization. Identifying, analysing and, from time to time, managing such organizational emotions takes more than mere emotional intelligence - it requires a deeper understanding of the unconscious dimensions of organizations and that cauldron of passion that keeps them simmering.

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