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PARALLEL PAPERS V
SUNDAY 9th JULY 930-1045
ROOM II - 7.0.08

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The space of the whistleblower: The territory of the lost good self

In this paper I explore and develop a new understanding of the processes that underlie the stigmatization of whistleblowers. I call into question the implicit assumption that whistleblowers are stigmatized principally or exclusively because they represent the despised 'other'. Instead, I take a contrary view and argue that – as well as representing the 'other' who is despised – whistleblowers are felt to be problematic because they unconsciously represent a lost, good part of the self of staff members.

I thus argue that the 'space' of the whistleblower is importantly the 'territory of the self' of other employees, rather than exclusively the 'territory of the other', and that this space is specifically the territory of the good self that has been lost, and is no longer available. This lost aspect is felt to be troublesome because (a) it is able to express and give voice to something that the self is no longer able to, and because (b) it is felt that the self is torn asunder, turned on itself,

full of accusation, persecution and hatred. The issues raised by the whistleblower thus evoke deep shame and guilt in staff members, and this gives rise to intense hatred of the whistleblower. As a result, strong feelings of anger and vengeance are felt and often enacted towards the whistleblower.

In taking this approach, I also call into question a second assumption that underlies much of the literature, one that suggests that whistleblowers are stigmatized principally or even exclusively as an exercise of power against them, as an attempt to defeat the 'other'. Arguing that whistleblowers are unconsciously felt to signify a lost good part of the self of the person doing the stigmatizing, I suggest that stigmatization is also undertaken as a means to avoid unwanted emotions being experienced by staff members. In particular, feelings of guilt, shame and anxiety, both about the loss of the self's functioning, and in relation to the problems that the whistleblower may expose, are felt to be evoked by these whistleblowers, and therefore felt to be too painful to bear.

I draw on ideas from psychoanalysis as well their application to organizational dynamics, sometimes known as 'systems psychodynamics', in my formulation. Specifically, beginning with ideas from psychoanalysis, I explore Freud (1905) on projection and Klein (1946) on projective identification. Turning to the application of these ideas to organizational dynamics, I draw on

Armstrong (2005) and his ideas about organizational truth, as well as the related question of what can and can't be said in organizations; Petriglieri and Stein (2012) on projective identification in organizations; and Waddell (1998) on scapegoating and projective identification.

I then examine the literature on whistleblowing. I outline briefly several of the main themes and ideas and ideas in this genre, and show how the question of the 'territory' of the whistleblower's identity emerges as a key issue. I then provide a detailed examination of the whistleblowing during the crisis at the Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust, one of the most serious health crises in the UK in recent times, to illustrate these issues. I explore the treatment of several whistleblowers at the Trust, showing how they are excluded and stigmatized in extreme and problematic ways. I argue that these whistleblowers unconsciously represent the lost good self of staff members, and may thus be said to occupy the 'territory of the self', rather than what is usually understood to be the case, exclusively the 'territory of the other' of staff members.

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