

# **SOCIAL DEFENCES AGAINST ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*It is argued that for organizational learning to occur maladaptive social defences within the organization have to be altered. The origins of the concept of social defences are traced through the work of Jaques and Menzies. A new concept of "system domain", and related concepts of "system domain fabric", and "system domain defences", are proposed in order to account for the difficulties in sustaining organizational change in organizations that share a similar primary task.*

*"Organizational learning" is defined as occurring when there is co-evolution of "organizational container" and "contained." The article distils variables from three successful consultancy/action research projects which are characteristic of organizations that are learning, and it is hypothesised that the creation of "organizational awareness" is necessary for organizational learning to occur.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

All organizations have socially constructed defences against the anxiety which is aroused through carrying out the primary task of the organization. These social defences may be evident in the organization structure, in its procedures, information systems, roles, in its culture, and in the gap between what the organization says it is doing and what it is actually doing. Social defences are "created" unconsciously by members of the organization through their interactions in carrying out the primary task.

How do social defences affect the capacities of organizations to learn? This article explores the origin of the concept of social defences in the work of Jaques and Menzies, introduces the concept of "system domain" defences (as distinct from the concept of "domain defences," developed by Gilmore and Krantz (1990)), offers a definition of "organizational learning," and explores some of the characteristics of organizations that are learning and the changes in social defences that are required. Case material from the author's action research and consultancy experience is used to explore the latter.

Peter Senge's (1992) ideas and theories about the "learning organization" have had a considerable impact on management thinking over the last six or seven years. Senge makes no claim to originality in the discovery of the different

elements of the “fifth discipline”: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision and team learning. However, like his example of the DC3 (p.6) (which combined different required technologies in order to fly) he puts the disciplines together in a way that makes the learning organization as a concept “fly.” The disciplines which combine to create the learning organization do not, however, include psychoanalytic social systems thinking and practice, and in particular, the absence of attention to unconscious processes influencing individual group and organizational functioning is, in the author’s opinion, a major weakness in the “learning organization” theory. The five disciplines would seem to be “fair weather” tools; changing the world of maladaptive social defences requires something stronger.

## **ORIGINS OF THE CONCEPT: JAQUES AND MENZIES**

Elliott Jaques introduced the concept of social defences against anxiety in 1955. The “specific hypothesis” he explored was that “*one* of the primary cohesive elements binding individuals into institutionalised human association is that of defence against psychotic anxiety.”(1955, p.479) Jaques (1955) linked the concept of identification in group formation as derived by Freud (1921), with the processes of introjective and projective identification as elaborated by Melanie Klein (1932, 1948, 1952) (p.483). He gives, as an example, the splitting and projection that frequently occurs on a ship, where “the first officer must take all the shit and he must be prepared to be a shit,” so that the ship’s captain “can thereby be more readily idealised and identified with as a good protective figure.”(p.483) Jaques draws on case study material from the Glacier Metal Company Project to support his hypothesis. He concludes “the view has here been advanced that one of the primary dynamic forces pulling individuals into institutionalised human association is that of defence against paranoid and depressive anxiety; and, conversely, that all institutions are unconsciously used by their members as mechanisms of defence against these psychotic anxieties.” (p.496)

The classic study of social defences against anxiety was carried out by Isabel Menzies (1970) in the exploration of the nursing system of a teaching hospital in London. This study, which took place in the late 1950’s, has proved seminal in its influence on social scientists who are working within the psychoanalytic social systems Tavistock tradition.<sup>1</sup> In this study Menzies showed how the nursing system was structured and partly functioned as a way of evading the anxiety of caring for patients, many of whom were in distress and pain, and some of whom were dying.

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<sup>1</sup> This work is increasingly being referred to as “socio-analysis” ie. The *activity* of consultancy and action research that combines and synthesises methodologies derived from psycho-analysis, group relations theory, social systems thinking, and organizational behaviour.

Defences that were evident were: depersonalization and the denial of the significance of the individual, eg, “the liver in bed ten,” “the pneumonia in bed fifteen”; detachment and denial of feelings, eg, “a good nurse doesn’t mind moving”; splitting up the nurse/patient relationship so that a patient was cared for by a number of nurses and no one nurse is particularly responsible for any patient; the attempt to eliminate decisions by ritual task performance; reducing the weight and responsibility of decision making by constant checks and counter checks; purposeful obscurity in the formal distribution of responsibility; reduction of the impact of responsibility by delegation upwards; idealisation and the underestimation of personal developmental possibilities; and the avoidance of change. (pp 11-23)

What was crucial about these social defences was that they were operating for the most part unconsciously, they were deeply ingrained in the system and very difficult to change. And most importantly, what needs to be stressed is that the social defences were maladaptive for carrying out the primary task of the hospital in an effective way. There was very high staff turnover among nurses, the best nurses were leaving, morale was low, the defensive system did not actually work and anxiety was high, and the demands for constant movement of nurses in operational areas were leading to a break down in the training system.

Yet the nursing system, both in the hospital Menzies worked in, and more widely in the UK, was resistant to the findings, and the social defences she outlined continued to function to the detriment of nurses and patients. There was no organizational learning. Indeed rather the opposite. The study which was reviewed in *The Nursing Times* was said to be “a devastating criticism of the nursing service,”<sup>2</sup> which was then “refuted” by the reviewer. The reviewer concluded her review by saying that there was “a simple explanation,” and that was that “the hospital described had been incompetently run for some time,” and “my solution for the difficulties of the hospital would be to appoint a matron of known competence whom the nurses knew and trusted, who could restore their self-confidence by re-establishing order in the nursing service.”<sup>3</sup> Menzies, in an article in *The Nursing Times* a few months later, comments about the resistance to change: “change, like decision making, arouses stress since it implies giving up a familiar present for a relatively unknown future. The nursing service seems to cope with this by avoiding change whenever possible and clinging to familiar ways of doing things even when they are becoming demonstrably inappropriate.”<sup>4</sup>

To learn, whether as an individual, a group, or an organization requires giving up ignorance, or something that is thought to be known. If it is something the

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in MENZIES LYTH, I.E.P. *Containing anxiety in institutions*. London: Free Association Books, 1988, pp. 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* p. 94.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p. 107.

individual, group, or organization thinks it already knows, to learn, and thereby to change, is like a mini-death to a known way of being. Organizational learning, which is likely to change this known way of being, (however maladaptive it may be) will be resisted.

## SYSTEM DOMAIN DEFENCES

While Menzies wrote of the hospital, or the nursing system within the hospital, as though it *contained* the social defence system, the system of defences was actually operating in a much wider arena - an arena akin to what Eric Trist (1981) has called a “domain”. In this case, the “domain” would be described as all those many institutions with a similar primary task to the hospital, and what I will call a “**system domain**”. What is being hypothesized is that organizations with a similar primary task, which together constitute a “system domain” as described, are likely to have similar social defences against anxiety. Part of the difficulty in modifying the social defences within a particular institution, in this case a hospital, is because they are an expression of system domain fabric, and are not “stand alone” institutions.

By “system domain fabric” is meant that which is *shared* across the institutions that comprise the system domain. Besides a similar primary task, this may include:

- Roles ,organization structure, and authority systems.
- Policies and procedures, information systems, and accountabilities.
- Professional training.
- Funding arrangements.
- Technology and technical systems.
- Representational systems, e.g. Trade Unions, Professional Associations.
- Knowledge base.
- Organizational culture, and “System Domain in the Mind” (see below).
- Capacities and psychological characteristics of the people employed.
- Environment - political, social, economic, physical etc.

If Menzies had been successful in introducing changes within the nursing system in the hospital, it is likely that the changes would have been washed away over time due to the nursing system being part of a wider system domain of defences<sup>5</sup>. This indeed is the fate of many action research and

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<sup>5</sup> The social defences Menzies described were widespread in U.K. hospitals at the time,(and indeed still persist in varying forms in Australian hospitals in the 1990’s). When people move from one local institution within a system domain to another, in this case from hospital to hospital they carry with them their “System Domain in the Mind” to the new institution, which is likely to include the current system domain defences. Unless there are concurrent shifts in significant domain fabric factors, such as authority systems, policies and procedures, professional training, and system domain culture, changes in a local institution are likely to be eroded over time. The more positive aspect of this is that where local change has been successful the people involved become the carriers for these ideas into other institutions. The concept of the “System Domain in the Mind” is a development of Pierre Turquet’s original concept of the “Institution in the Mind”. (See Lawrence 1986).

consultancy projects, including a number that the author has carried out. As a consultant working with an institution which forms part of a systems domain, it is tempting to view the institution as a “stand alone” and not take fully into account the wider system domain defence system. There in fact may be no proper recognizable “client” because of the nature of the system domain.

The concept of “system domain defences” with its focus on institutions with a similar primary task, is to be distinguished from Gilmore and Krantz’s concept of “domain based defensive processes.” In their article, Gilmore and Krantz (1990) explored how the social defences of “managerialism” and the cult of the “charismatic leader” operated to split leadership and management within many different kinds of organization in the U.S. Their concept of “domain” is much wider than the “systems domain” described in this article. Indeed their “domain” is more akin to a regional “global domain,” as the social defences they have uncovered operate in other societies, eg: Australia, and the UK.

An action research project carried out by the Australian Institute of Social Analysis with a public secondary school in Victoria, provides another example of the problems of organizational learning due to system domain defences. The project had the aim: “to develop a system of organization and appropriate working culture that would be optimum to the educational task of a state secondary school and the well being of teachers, students, administrators and ancillary staff.”<sup>6</sup> From observation, the normative primary task of the school was to provide opportunities for students to learn in specified curriculum areas, and to develop their intellectual, social, imaginative and sporting capacities. This task, or something very like it, is a task which the school shared with other government secondary schools, ie: its system domain.<sup>7</sup> To carry out this primary task implies difference in individual achievement. What the research team discovered, however, was that the task the school was actually carrying out, the phenomenal primary task,<sup>8</sup> was to *deny differences*.

The denial of difference operated as a defence in numerous ways:

- The culture of the school included the ideology that parents were as much a part of, or members of, the school as teachers and students.

<sup>6</sup> See BAIN, A., LONG, S., & ROSS, S., Paper houses: The authority vacuum in a government school. *Australian Institute of Social Analysis Report*, Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1992, p.6.

<sup>7</sup> Besides sharing a similar primary task the school also shared with other Victorian public secondary schools a similar authority system at the level of the school, the same accountabilities to a Council, Region and Department, the same selection and deselection procedures for staff, curriculum areas (within which there were some choices), teacher training, Trade Union authority and membership, pay and conditions, funding arrangements ,and a “System Domain in the Mind” ie. the system domain fabric.

<sup>8</sup> See LAWRENCE, W. G. Understanding Organizational Life, p.59, in CHATTOPADHYAY, G. P., GANGJEE Z. H., HUNT M. L. & LAWRENCE W. G. *When the Twain Meet*, Allahabad: A. H. Wheeler & Co. private limited.

- A de facto policy of the school was to promote all students from one year level to the next, irrespective of achievement, ie: the students were being treated as though they were all the same, independent of achievement.
- Decisions about promotion from one year level to the next were displaced from the school system to the parents (who invariably said promote).
- There was a viewed sameness of roles among staff. As one member of the staff put it: “At ... the Principal is just another job.”
- Selection and deselection policies and procedures indicated an underlying belief that teachers were all equally competent. The school had virtually no say over the selection of staff, and it was extremely tortuous and difficult to deselect an incompetent member of staff. Knowledge of incompetence was systemically repressed, with teachers who had repeatedly failed moving on from one school to another.

The culture of the school was one of pseudo-democratic egalitarianism. Authority over vital aspects of the school’s functioning was held centrally within management or union bureaucracies, (selection and deselection of staff, selection of students), or had been displaced into parents (the de facto authority to promote students from one year level to the next). The absence of authority in the role of Principal led, the Research team hypothesized, to fragmentation within the school and a committee and paper culture (which masqueraded as the authority.) As a defence against the “chaos of the school in the mind,” which was present in some of the drawings that staff and students did of their experience in the school, students developed strong friendship cliques, usually ethnic based, and good teachers drew firm boundaries around their classes.

Organizational learning linked with change was very difficult in this school context, where the authority system was diffused inappropriately to systems outside the school, and the school in its operations expressed system domain defences against carrying out the educational task. The system domain defences acted to deny differences between students, between staff, and between the school and parents.

Like Menzies, the research team also failed, and indeed were kicked out of the school. But even had the team been successful in carrying out the primary task of the project and therefore changing the defence system, it is doubtful whether the changes would have been sustained.

It has been hypothesized that the power of system domain defences operating through the nursing service of a particular hospital in the UK, and different system domain defences operating through a particular government secondary school in Victoria, prevented organizational learning and change in these institutions. The questions that need to be asked are what are the conditions for organizational learning, what happens to the social defences, and how does organizational learning take place?

## NATURE OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

But first, what is organizational learning? Unfortunately Senge is not of much help. While he describes organizations that are learning and the five disciplines which combine within the learning organization, as far as the author can tell he does not *define* organizational learning in the **Fifth Discipline**.<sup>9</sup>

I have struggled to give definition to “organizational learning,” which is a puzzle as I have no doubt about the reality of organizational learning. Definitions like “a capacity to creatively carry out the primary task of the organization while adaptively modifying functioning in conditions of social, economic, technological, political and organizational turbulence” have come to mind, which leave me unsatisfied. When I reflect on consultancy or action research projects where I have no doubt organizational learning has been taking place, there is one aspect which stands out, and that is evolution of “organizational container” and “contained.”<sup>10</sup> While an invitation to this process is usually initiated by the consultant at the start of a project through suggesting certain “organizational containers” for the project, the pleasure and reward for the consultant is when the evolution occurs without his or her involvement, and particularly when this continues some years after his or her withdrawal. Organizational learning is to do with growth of capacity, and this growth is inseparable from the co-evolution of “organizational container” and “contained”.

Bion’s concept of “container” and “contained” provides a bridging link between *individual learning* and *organizational learning*. While individual learning is a constituent of organizational learning, the two are distinct concepts, and I see organizational learning as something different from the summation of individual learnings within an organization. A shift in focus is

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<sup>9</sup> There is a large literature on organizational learning much of which is concerned with *cognitive learning* at the expense of *emotional learning*. For a recent article that reviews (in the main) the cognitive learning approach to organizational learning see Martin B. Meznar and Davide Nicolini, The Social Construction of Organizational Learning: Conceptual and Practical Issues in the Field. *Human Relations*, Vol. 48, No. 7, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> The concept of “container” and “contained” was developed by Wilfred Bion. See BION, W.R. *Attention and Interpretation*, London: Tavistock Publications Ltd., 1970, Chapt. 7, pp. 72-82.

required akin to Bion's shift from observing individuals in a group to observing phenomena that arise at the level of the group. In this case organizational learning is to do with the phenomena that arise at the level of the organization.

## **CONDITIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING**

In order to explore the conditions for organizational learning and how it occurs, I have reviewed the "endpoints" of three consultancy/action research/action learning projects that I have directed, and distilled what seemed to be significant variables in organizations I consider were learning. In the Baric example, the organizational learning was continuing at least six years after the withdrawal of the Tavistock Research team. At Pentridge it continued after the withdrawal of the consultant team.<sup>11</sup> The three examples are:

1. An action research project with Baric Computing Services Ltd - a large UK computer bureau.<sup>12</sup>
2. An action research project into Day Nursery Care for children under five in the UK.<sup>13</sup>
3. A change management project with Pentridge, a maximum security prison in Melbourne, using IGO action learning methods.<sup>14</sup>

At the end of the action research or consultancy engagement the characteristics which seem to be significant across these three very different organizations are:

### **Primary Task**

All three organizations had an enhanced capacity to carry out the primary task of the organization, whether measured in profit terms and job satisfaction in the computer bureau, the relations between nurses and children in the day nursery, and the relations between prison officers and prisoners in the prison.

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<sup>11</sup> The long term success of this project could not be assessed as a decision was made by the Victorian State Government (during the project) to close the prison. The prison is scheduled to finally close its doors in 1997.

<sup>12</sup> See BAIN, A. *The Baric experiment: The design of jobs and organization for the expression and growth of human capacity*. Tavistock Institute Occasional Paper. No. 4, 1982. This project that formed part of a ten year engagement with the computer bureau took place 1974 to 1976 with reviews of the experiment in 1976, 1977, 1978, 1980, & 1982.

<sup>13</sup> See BAIN, A. & BARNETT, L. *The Design of a Day Care System in a Nursery Setting for Children Under Five*. *Tavistock Institute Occasional Paper*. No. 8, 1986. This project which took place between 1976 and 1979 had the aim of designing and implementing an optimum system of day nursery care for children under five.

<sup>14</sup> This one year change management program took place in 1993 and 1994 with a review one year later in 1995.

## **Project Ownership**

During all three projects there was a movement from “non ownership,” (eg: “it’s the Tavistock’s project” or “the Governor’s project”) to staff at all levels of the organization who were involved in the project “owning” the process and the project. And in the case of the prison, maximum security prisoners came to “own” the project. Ownership took about four to six months to develop in each case.

## **Leadership, Authority and Roles**

The CEO or equivalent<sup>15</sup> was actively involved in all three projects, and gave support to the projects from the inception. In all three cases, the necessary authority was present within the organization to bring about fundamental organizational change (unlike the school example.)

While all three CEOs were able to lead with authority, and did so, leadership for change as the projects became owned by staff was not vested in just this one person (or the consultant team), but was taken up in varying degrees by all members of the organization or project team. As this occurred, the weight of the responsibility on the CEO began to lift.

This was most evident in the Pentridge Change Management Project. The constant commitment of the Governor of Pentridge to the Program was vital to its success. He commented in a review session (1994): “Pentridge was struggling for a vision. I latched onto the change management program as a vision.” Maintaining the momentum was difficult and draining, particularly at the start of the program when not everyone agreed. There were concerns that it would mean more work, that it wasn’t needed and “we don’t do it this way”.

The Governor continued, “maintaining my own focus and belief was important.” As the program continued, maintaining the commitment and momentum became easier for him as other members of the project team took up that responsibility.

Hierarchy became less significant as an organizing principle in the minds of staff in all three organizations as staff began to take up authority appropriately for task. As organizational learning developed in all three organizations, the roles of members of the organization generally, or members of the project team, changed in all cases to people taking on more and different

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<sup>15</sup> Managing Director of Baric, Officer in Charge of the Day Nursery, Governor of Pentridge.

responsibilities and more fully using and developing their capacities for taking decisions. The “role spectrum” was enlarged and different. Taking up authority appropriately for task, without being told as in a dependency culture, was perhaps a key to this.

### **Individual Group and Organizational Interdependence**

In all three projects there was a strong link between individual learning, group learning - pairs of nurses in the nursery, three groups in Baric (6 to 8 people in each), six project teams at Pentridge (2 to 4 in each team) - and organizational learning. Through this learning, work was less fragmented and became more purposefully linked to the task of the organization as a whole.

A robust culture supportive of change was developed in all three projects, and this culture, together with leadership for change, was strong enough in all three cases to overcome the powerful resistances to change which were present in all three organizations.

### **Reflection and Learning Spaces**

Perhaps most relevantly for the purposes of this article, all three organizations consciously constructed space for common reflection on activities, which allowed for a developing awareness of the “whole”, ie: the organization, and its interconnected parts. As awareness of the social defences against anxiety developed, in other words people became conscious of them rather than remaining unconscious, other ways of exploring and modifying this anxiety became possible, so the maladaptive aspects of the social defences changed.

In the computer bureau example, the formation of a Steering Group and the functioning of various project teams provided a model of reflection on action, and planning actions, for management. This allowed management in turn to give data conversion operators working in three semi autonomous groups (6-8 people) the freedom to manage themselves eg. to stop work and make decisions about whatever they were doing whenever they wished.

In the day nursery project regular weekly staff meetings (with no fixed agenda), room meetings the consultants had with staff, and organizational role analysis sessions with the officer in charge, provided the organizational learning spaces for the project.

In the Pentridge Change Management Program the project team of 13 members, which constituted the Pentridge Unit Management Implementation Group (PUMIG) from different divisions in Pentridge and from different hierarchical levels from Prison Officer to Governor, met as a total group once a month with Suzanne Ross and the author as Consultants. The task was to

reflect on progress, discuss difficulties in implementing action learning projects, and to link the six action learning projects which were being carried out in the Prison. The project teams also met separately once a month with the consultants to discuss progress, difficulties, and planning the next steps in the project. The agenda for the project meetings, and group as a whole meetings, was largely determined by the members of the project. There were sessions of organizational role analysis with the Governor of Pentridge, and meetings with the Steering Group responsible for overseeing the direction and management of the project. The Steering Group comprised the Director of Prisons in Victoria, senior management, and representatives from Pentridge. The Steering Group was crucial in providing support for the project at this level and sanctioning behaviour for implementing a new form of culture, which cut across very strong system domain defences within the prison service.

There were certain essential features of these “learning spaces” that were the same in each of the three projects:

1. The agenda for the work of these learning spaces was largely derived from the members of the organization themselves working on the task of the program.
2. The learning space was not filled up by the CEO or equivalent.
3. The groups came to accept silence at appropriate times rather than filling in the silence with talk.
4. The learning spaces allowed for a stronger connectedness to develop between individuals and organization.
5. The resistances to change emerge in the relationship of project members to the consultants, which can then be explored in these learning spaces. Working on perceptions of this relationship, the transference, helps to deepen insight into work processes, and decrease the power of damaging projective systems which thereby modifies the social defences against anxiety. The process increases the project team and, organization’s capacities for discerning and managing reality.<sup>16</sup>
6. As the social defences against anxiety are modified or changed, the organization concurrently develops a capacity to learn and develop.

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<sup>16</sup> For a description of this process see BAIN, A. *The Baric Experiment*, Chapter 7, Work Culture Analysis.

To give an example of the modification of social defences from the day nursery project. At the start of the project the system of care was structured partly as a defence against the experience of intimacy with the children. This was evident in a number of ways: first in a domestic culture of care and a role for nursery nurses focussed on domestic duties, physical care, appearance, play and companionship, with a corresponding emphasis in the role of Officer in Charge; treating children as a group rather than as individuals, and as though they had identical needs; the practice of multiple indiscriminate care; the ordering and regimentation of the children; the denial of the importance of attachment relationships; the attitude that all nursery nurses are much the same and easily replaceable, and therefore it doesn't matter if the nurse leaves; the absence of thought and curiosity about a child's behaviour within a strong dependency culture; and the separation of nursery care from parental care.

By the end of the project the system of defences against the experience of intimacy with the children had changed to a culture where the primary concern was with a child's psychological well being. Nurses were able to form deeper attachment relationships with the children, work out strategies of caring for individual children which benefited the children, and developed skills for working jointly with parents in the care of the child. The change in the focus of the role, the forming of deeper attachment relationships, and the development of new insights, attitudes and skills, increased job satisfaction and reduced boredom.

A case assignment system replaced multiple indiscriminate care with evident benefit for the children and staff. The formation of new attitudes among nursery staff, ways of working with children and parents, together with changes in the structure of care, (eg: case assignment, age related groups,) led to a reduction in the stress for nursery staff and higher job satisfaction. There was a dramatic decrease in staff sickness during the project, from on average, each member of the permanent staff losing 53 days a year, to 23.9 days in 1976, 12.1 days in 1977, and 5.7 days in 1978. (See Bain and Barnett, 1986).

The changes in the nurses role, relationships with parents, and structure of care enabled some children in the nursery to form deeper and more stable attachment relationships with a particular nurse. These children developed more normally.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL AWARENESS**

In all three organizations, Baric, the Day Nursery, and Pentridge, the maladaptive aspects of social defences changed. In a sense the change is from unconscious social defences permeating the organization, and to a large extent determining behaviour, to the organization or project team consciously constructing and using spaces for reflection on action, learning from this

experience and planning. *Another level has thereby been built into organizational consciousness, a level of organizational awareness, which was not present before.*

Organizations that lack learning space, or reflective space which allows for organizational awareness, are “asleep” to their own behaviour. The organization may appear to be awake and responsive, but in fact is acting in a repetitive way without thought or reflection. This “pre-learning” organization is characterised by mainly individualized nodes of organizational awareness, which are frequently highly differentiated from each other and to a large extent role dependent.

Changing the “container” for organizational experience and developing a container for organizational awareness, together with reflection on what is “contained,” brings these nodes of organizational awareness together with a potentiality for creating new thoughts and different actions.

Consultancy of the kind that is being alluded to, tends to wake the organization from its sleep, and part of the consultancy is to create space for developing organizational awareness. Without this created space for developing organizational awareness I would find it difficult to talk about organizational learning.

## **SYSTEM DOMAIN DEFENCES REVISITED**

In three of the case examples that have been used - Public Secondary School, Day Nursery, and Pentridge Prison - the different system domains these organizations are members of is clear, and that all three system domains are in the public sector in the U.K. or Australia. So, too, are the system domain defences against anxiety, eg. organization of day nurseries as an unconscious defence against the experience of intimacy with children was widespread in the U.K. at the time of the action research project. While the Consultant Teams on these projects did not have the concept of a systems domain, nevertheless we were aware in varying degrees of factors beyond the school, day nursery, and prison, that were likely to adversely affect the organizational change experiments. This was not the case with Baric, the private sector computer bureau, and the most successful of the four projects in achieving long term organizational evolution. While Baric was no doubt part of a wider systems domain which included other computer bureaus with similar primary tasks, this was not a significant factor during the project, nor did system domain factors adversely affect the subsequent organizational evolution.<sup>17</sup> To this extent Baric

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<sup>17</sup> The main threat to this process of evolution focussed around the difficulty for the wider management culture (not involved in the experiment) understanding and accepting the

is perhaps more akin to what has been called a “stand alone” institution.

While further thinking is required concerning the nature of system domains, and their relevance in the formation of social defences in local institutions, particularly in the private, and non government sectors, nevertheless I don't believe a sharp dichotomy is likely to be found between private and public sector organizations in this regard. What may be found is a capacity continuum for evolutionary change that is dependent on the nature of the particular systems domain in both sectors.

This leads me to a more general hypothesis that the “power” of system domain fabric, and the system domain defences generated, to prevent localised change occurring and being sustained during an organizational change project is a function of the level of authority within the local system,<sup>18</sup> and the extent to which system domain factors are within the authority system, or influence, of members of the organizational change project.

We can compare the School, Day Nursery, and Pentridge Prison in this regard. The School, as we have seen, had very little authority at the level of the School to manage its input, transformation, and output processes. Authority for managing significant aspects of this process was held centrally by senior management and Trade Unions, or had been displaced into parents. As such the capacity to initiate and implement change was quite limited. The Day Nursery had significantly more authority for managing input, transformation, and output processes within DHSS, and local authority guidelines, and as such a greater capacity to initiate and implement change. Pentridge, too, had significantly more authority at the level of the prison (in comparison with the school) to initiate and implement changes within Correctional Services Victoria policies and procedures. The prison service in Victoria also has an integrated management system, with clear accountabilities between Governor and the Director of Prisons, - unlike the School or Day Nursery systems. This can assist in the initiation and implementation of change, but perhaps even more significantly an integrated management system is a distinct advantage in terms of potential leverage in managing system domain factors. As far as the evolution of long term change is concerned only the Pentridge project had the capacity in its project organization and membership to achieve this.<sup>19</sup>

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principles of the experiment. Even though productivity had risen 34%, labour turnover had been reduced from 110% to 24%, revenue per operator had been increased by 2000 pounds a year, three levels of managerial hierarchy had been removed, and job satisfaction and morale was very high among the operators, given all this there were still attempts by managers to turn back a successful self managing team structure to a conventional management hierarchy with section supervisors, etc. This was successfully resisted.

<sup>18</sup> To manage input, transformation, and output processes.

<sup>19</sup> While system domain factors were not significant in the Baric example, nevertheless the CEO's active support of the evolution of the experiment was vital in preventing its erosion through the reassertion of traditional management practices and culture.

The concept of a system domain and the social defences that are part of the fabric of the system domain clearly has significant implications for organizational change project design. While it's outside the scope of this paper to explore this in more depth, from the foregoing the implications should be relatively clear.

## CONCLUSION

It has been hypothesized that during action research and consultancy projects that initiate organizational change there is a co-evolution of "organizational container" and "contained". This co-evolution of "organizational container" and "contained" is to do with the growth of capacity and may be used as a definition and as a measure of organizational learning.

It has also been hypothesized that all organizations have socially constructed defences against the anxiety of carrying out the primary task of the organization and that these defences prevent organizational learning. Social defences permeate what is "contained" in the project, and they are also likely to influence the design of the "organizational container" for the project. Successful work on what is "contained" by consultants and members of the project team will modify these social defences and provide opportunities for the growth of new understandings of organizational realities that can then be translated into different actions. This in turn is likely to provoke an evolution of the "organizational container" for the project.<sup>20</sup> What it's possible to think, say, and do is now different from the start of the project, and this is likely to continue to evolve as the project progresses.

While this may be occurring at the local organizational level it has been suggested that many, if not most, organizations are part of a *systems domain* - a systems domain comprises all organizations with a similar primary task - and that the social defences within these organizations are actually an expression of *system domain defences*. Unless the local system is extremely robust (or the system domain changes), it is likely that the organizational changes that have been initiated within the local system will be eroded over time due to the influence of the system domain fabric, and the system domain defences.

A more general hypothesis was offered that the "power" of system domain fabric, and the system domain defences generated, to prevent localised change occurring and being sustained during an organizational change project is a function of the level of authority within the local system, and the extent to which system domain factors are within the authority system, or influence, of members of the organizational change project.

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<sup>20</sup> In the Baric Experiment, for example, there were three major changes to the project organization that came about through learning as it developed.

The concept of system domain defences is located between the concept of social defences at the level of the local institution, as evidenced by Menzies' study of the nursing system of a hospital, and the concept of "domain defences" identified by Gilmore and Krantz.

The article distils changes in five factors that the author considers were significant in three organizations in which organizational learning was taking place - Baric, Day Nursery, and Pentridge -

- Primary Task
- Project Ownership
- Leadership, Authority, and Roles
- Individual, Group, and Organizational Interdependence
- Reflection and Learning Spaces

All three organizations during the action research or consultancy projects developed a level of *organizational awareness* that was not present before. This level of organizational awareness was the result of the co-evolution of "organizational container" and "contained".

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## **SOCIAL DEFENCES AGAINST ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING**

### **ABSTRACT**

It is argued that for organizational learning to occur maladaptive social defences within the organization have to be altered. The origins of the concept of social defences are traced through the work of Jaques and Menzies. A new concept of “system domain”, and related concepts of “system domain fabric”, and “system domain defences”, are proposed in order to account for the difficulties in sustaining organizational change in organizations that share a similar primary task.

“Organizational learning” is defined as occurring when there is co-evolution of “organizational container” and “contained.” The article distils variables from three successful consultancy/action research projects which are characteristic of organizations that are learning, and it is hypothesised that the creation of “organizational awareness” is necessary for organizational learning to occur.

**Key words: social defences, organizational learning, system domain , system domain defences, organizational awareness, action research.**