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Journal of Management Inquiry 2008 17: 239

DOI: 10.1177/1056492608320691

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Company on the Couch

Coping With Organizational Dysfunctions

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I found “Company on the Couch: Unveiling Toxic Behavior in Dysfunctional Organizations” by Alan Goldman intriguing and seductive. It weaves and turns, keeping one entertained, ending up in a list of recommendations that are as uncertain as some aspects of the anecdotal stories. I became increasingly careful and critical of what I was reading. I felt uncomfortable with some of the unchecked assertions. However, it raises important issues and a few challenges for me.

I am concerned about the phenomenological significance of the article. Its approach reduces human experiences into objects, physical elements, and chemical-like by-products. Toxins are chemicals that kill and maim. As poisons, they are classified and kept away from people. There are centers for poison control and agencies that monitor and manage toxins and toxicity levels in the environment. Human experiences and relations are not substances. I am concerned that we are using terms that confuse physical sciences with social sciences, and in blurring the line there can be confusion and opportunism. The article reifies human experiences and deals with the complex set of social interactions and dynamics somewhat casually. It does not define *toxin* and *toxic*. It does connote that toxic levels increase, but it does not indicate how one may go about measuring the toxin/toxic levels. In chemistry formulae, methods and approaches to classify toxins and measure their potency are arduously and rigorously defined and determined. In this case, the terms are not defined.

One sentence states, “Managers, HR, and consultants necessarily face toxic dynamics and its dysfunctional effects.” Is it “toxic” dynamics that cause “dysfunctional” effects or is it “dysfunctional dynamics” that cause the toxic effects? We cannot know.

One may ask, how is this labyrinth conceptualized and constructed? Without clearly defining terms or making the underlying assumptions about human nature and values explicit, the article proceeds to analyze the cases. The conceptual framework for analyzing the cases is neither outlined nor examined with rigor. It is unclear how

the structures, processes, and dynamics of toxins are formed and evolved. How to go about identifying, analyzing, diagnosing, and making choiceful actions to change dysfunctional human systems along the proposed notions of toxins, toxic, and toxicity goes unexplored. There is also confusion about the unit and level of analyses. Is the focus of the article on organization, group, or individual units of analyses? Although the article takes intellectual risks to reify organizations as persons getting on the couch (with free will as a condition, should I assume?), the article’s focus seems to be on the individual unit (the person) of analysis. The author, as a clinical psychologist, has taken professional and intellectual liberty to clothe the article at a corporate level of analysis, but in fact the essence of the work is psychological and at the *person* level. The confusion resulting in mixing the units of analyses is troubling. Although dynamics may be operating at both levels, how they get separated and discussed is important.

I found the anecdotal cases entertaining and complex but overly simplified. The use of such terms as *toxins*, *toxicity*, *toxin detectors*, and *toxin handlers* did not illuminate the situation. Ironically, it seems that the resolution in the cases came about through emotional openness, honoring human experience. The breakthrough between McKenna and Cutter came about when they realized their neglectfulness to understand and acknowledge feelings and emotions in themselves and their counterparts. Through embracing their humanness and stopping their objectification of one another, they came to terms with one another and understood their human vulnerabilities, needs, and behavior. This simple illuminating human approach seems buried beneath the weight of psychological jargon.

I found the article provocative. One must read it while thinking about its philosophical, value-laden assertions. I came away feeling more strongly that what is needed is greater care of human dignity, kindness, and less objectification. We need to perpetuate ever greater awareness, sensitivity, and understanding of one another’s humanity and less commoditization of

our experiences, cognitions, feelings, and behaviors. I thank the author for this provocative and stimulating article.

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a PhD and an MBA in business strategy and organization development from the Anderson School at UCLA and an MSEE in semiconductor physics/electronics from the University of California. He has published extensively. His latest article on the neurotic styles of management received wide recognition. He consults with organizations in a variety of industries and teaches in the Presidents and Key Executives MBA and EMBA programs at Pepperdine.