

# The Psychostructure of Work

**"BEND ME, SHAPE ME, ANYWAY YOU WANT ME, AS LONG AS YOU LOVE ME IT'S ALRIGHT"**

*Adrian Carr*

The pop group American Breed would no doubt be surprised to find some of the lyrics to their attempt at the Australian hit parade in the late 1960s as a title to an article in a journal such as this. Nonetheless, the lyrics aptly capture a major dynamic in work organizations – namely, the moulding and selection of personality traits and attitudes. The orientation that results can be thought of as a *psychostructure*. Michael Maccoby, in his book *The Gamesman*, argued that corporations could be conceived of as psychostructures that required different kinds of "individuals" at different levels, and adds:

Any organization of work...can be described as a psychostructure that selects and moulds character...The concept of psychostructure... resolves an argument between the sociologically minded, who claim that the role determines behaviour, and the psychologically minded, who claim that personality determines behaviour. Although there is leeway in any role for some differences in style, intelligence, and character, as one moves up in a competitive and selective organization, these variations become less important[1].

Peters and Waterman, in *In Search of Excellence*[2], argued that of the eight characteristics of the so-called "excellent companies" the most fundamental was the "hands-on value driven". The shaping of values both internally and externally was considered essential in these excellent companies. The promotion of a value system is a part of the broader psychostructure that Maccoby envisages.

Douglas La Bier, in his book *Modern Madness: The Emotional Fallout of Success*[3], has similarly addressed the concept of a psychostructure of work in the context of exploring how it might stimulate and support

psychopathology. I have recently undertaken research[4] to examine the same phenomenon – more specifically, the psychostructure of work and its relationship to anxiety and depression among school principals ("managers"). Before considering my recent research it is useful to consider the conceptual framework and paradox that emerged from La Bier's studies of individuals who worked in government bureaucracies in America.

## **THE WORKING WOUNDED – THE SICK ARE NORMAL, AND THE NORMAL ARE SICK**

Douglas La Bier's book[3] is fundamentally a reflection by La Bier on a socio-psychoanalytic study that took some seven years and involved 230 people aged between 25 and 47. La Bier, a psychotherapist and a senior fellow at the Project on Technology, Work and Character in Washington, DC, was concerned with gaining an understanding of why many of his private patients who had successful careers were nevertheless emotionally troubled. He felt conventional psychoanalytic theory and other psychiatric and psychological theories were less than satisfactory in their explanations of any links between career success and emotional problems. La Bier had previously assumed that these troubled careerists had "difficulty in adjusting to the realities and demands of work"[3]. He thought that perhaps part of the origins of an explanation might relate to the issue of submitting oneself to authority – possibly a link to a childhood re-enactment of rebellion against a parental figure. However, after talking and working with Maccoby, La Bier shifted his focus to consider "the possibility that some of my patients were troubled by problems more within the realm of adult adaptation than childhood"[3].

La Bier interviewed individuals who were

successful careerists but who exhibited "emotional problems" such as anxiety, depression, overusage of drugs and alcohol, etc. Despite these emotional problems, these individuals were not inwardly disturbed. He also interviewed those who were successful careerists and who outwardly exhibited no signs of emotional problems.

What I discovered was that within this group were people who were very sick. Some were dominated by unconscious, irrational passions of power-lust, conquest, grandiosity, and destructiveness, or conversely by cravings for humiliation and domination. Yet their pathology did not seep into the arena of their daily working lives and on-the-job behaviour. They appeared very well-adapted to their work, very competent, and intellectually skilled. From the outside, perfectly "normal"[3].

The paradox that La Bier calls "Modern Madness" is that some people appear sick but are normal while others appear normal but are sick. La Bier explains this paradox in terms of the psychostructure of work and specifically argues that the "well-adapted winners" in their work show little sign of their sickness in their working situation "because their career environment, in effect, requires disturbed attitudes and passions for success"[3]. This conclusion is one that can be thought of amid a number of relationships between people and psychostructure that can be depicted in a typology (Figure 1).

In formulating such a typology, La Bier lays the ground for launching a broadside to many therapists assisting those who are stressed or burnt out: "For many practitioners today, social adjustment *per se* is so synonymous with mental health that any questions about what it is the person is adjusting to in the first place gets ignored"[3].

The "blame the victim" ideology that encourages the individual to look to their personal lives and personal attributes as the sources of their emotional problems is certainly called into question by La Bier's work. Organizations, or more precisely the "leaders" within them,

		Bureaucratic psychostructure	
		Pathological	Normal
People	Pathological	Adaptive (no symptoms)	Non-adaptive (symptoms)
	Normal	Non-adaptive (symptoms)	Adaptive (no symptoms)

Source: [4].

**FIGURE 1.**  
A Typology of the Relationship between People and the Psychostructure of the Work

obviously need to consider the implicit and explicit messages that are being conveyed to the individual employee and how they may be stimulating or moulding "sick" personalities, albeit unintentionally. It is precisely this issue that prompted my recent study of school principals[4] – an occupational group that in South Australia have been told by both their Director-General and Minister for Education that their prime role is one of manager.

### THE PSYCHOSTRUCTURE OF WORK AND THE INCIDENCE OF ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION AMONGST SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

In 1986 I commenced a study of "Stress amongst School Principals Manifested as Anxiety and Depression..."[5]. The focus of the study was to ascertain the extent of stress among school principals and the factors that were the sources of this stress. In early 1990 100 school principals currently employed in public schools in South Australia were asked to complete a Clinical Analysis Questionnaire (CAQ) as part of the first component of this investigation. The CAQ is a clinical instrument frequently used by psychologists which allows one to reflect on some 28 personality and clinical factors and a further nine second-order factors that include levels of anxiety and depression. It was intended to use the CAQ to identify those school principals within the sample who appeared to be experiencing "high" levels of anxiety and/or depression. A second component of the study involved interviewing this stressed group and using dream analysis to identify the sources of their anxiety and depression.

Ninety-four of those in the sample completed a valid CAQ, and 35 of these, i.e. 37.2 per cent, had a high level of anxiety and/or depression. In the second component of the study, 31 of those with a high level of anxiety and/or depression were interviewed, and in 81 per cent of instances the sources of the anxiety and/or depression were work-related – as opposed to relating to the individual's personal life.

The level of anxiety and depression among this occupational group is much larger than would be expected in the community generally and its attribution to work-related factors points to a need to analyse what it is about that work environment that stimulates such levels. At one level the analysis can be performed in terms of identifying the specific factors that those who are stressed view as the sources of such stress. In this case the major factors were (in descending order of frequency):

- feeling a lack of support from the Education Department;
- coping with heavy work demands and expectations of the employer;
- difficulty in interpersonal relationships with other staff;
- feeling a lack of support from both the Education Department and the Union;
- the managerial role being forced upon the principal;
- evaluation of school or one's own performance by the Education Department;
- conditions of employment; and
- high expectations of self as a principal.

At another level of analysis one can seek to identify the psychostructure that the working environment is producing and in that context gain a fuller understanding of why the factors identified above might be sources of stress. The information provided through the CAQ was used for this purpose in this study.

The CAQ, as mentioned above, has a potential to provide information about some 28 personality and clinical factors. This questionnaire seeks responses to some 272 questions. A registered psychologist could then score these responses, and with reference to "normative" tables, produce what is called a "sten" score (i.e. Standard-Ten score) for a nominal scale that ranges from zero to ten. This scale has a mean of 5.5 with scores of 4.5 to 6.5 considered average. Scores above and below this average are considered significant in the manner depicted in Table I.

In interpreting CAQ scales one normally looks for any consistencies across the scales. The interesting result in this study was what the supervising clinical psychologist called "averageness". The personality profiles of the

overall sample tended to be clustered in the "average" range. It was argued that this psychostructure of "averageness" was stimulated and promoted by the Education Department's insistence on school principals adopting a managerial role. This role essentially involves having a technical orientation to work. It was argued that the warmth, sensitivity, imagination and innovation characteristics that these principals had as teachers had been suppressed (and gradually weakened) in the progressive process of selection and moulding in their career path. The doctrine of administration was not one of a professional educator but instead one consumed by technical/managerial considerations. Peter Watkins aptly captures this doctrine of educational administration when he asserts:

That education administration is basically concerned with scientific and technical considerations. The management of schools is...seen as a technical exercise where the scientific application of suitable techniques is founded on the basic interest of manipulating people and resources so that a certain predefined, predictable outcome might in some way be achieved...the legitimization system of advanced capitalism tends to define all problems as technical and scientific problems. To this end the political system works to make acceptable whatever technical adjustments and scientific innovations are required in order to ensure the smooth functioning and perpetuation of the prevailing economic system[7].

Watkins starts to raise the broader social context in which administration is conceived and seeks to serve. Notwithstanding whether such an argument can be sustained, it is clear that certain personality traits and attitudes have been promoted and reinforced in the career path of becoming a principal. Doctrines of administration and certain values have been reproduced as a

Factor	Low score description	Average	High score description
Warmth	Reserved, detached, aloof		Warm, personable, easy-going
Intelligence	Concrete-thinking		Abstract-thinking
Emotional stability	Easily upset, emotional		Emotionally stable, calm
Dominance	Submissive, accommodating		Dominant, assertive, competitive
Boldness	Shy, timid		Bold, venturesome
Sensitivity	Tough-minded, insensitive		Sensitive, tender-minded
Imagination	Practical, down-to-earth		Imaginative, absent-minded
Insecurity	Confident, self-satisfied		Insecure, apprehensive
Radicalism	Conservative, traditional		Experimenting, innovative
<i>Source:</i> [6]			

**TABLE I.**  
**Some CAQ Personality Scales and their Generalized Meaning**

psychological phenomenon within the work setting. Whilst elsewhere I have argued for a particular direction of reform in educational administration[8,9], the issue is raised as to the nature of any "psychological contract"[10] between the organization and the individual employee. It occurs to me that both parties may be unaware of this "contract" – the psychostructure that is promoted by the structure and processes of an organization. What is the possible "emotional fallout" for the individual? It may be that the psychological contract has assumed a level of reification, in the Lukacs sense[11], without the parties being consciously aware. Unless the "emotional fallout" from organizational practice is examined in the broader context of the psychostructure that is stimulated and promoted, therapy for the victims will miss the mark. La Bier delivers a similar verdict:

The stress and burnout management experts teach, in effect, that the person who feels stress must have an internal defect; that the well-functioning person would not experience stress and burnout to begin with. Few analyze the work situation and environment as a source of stress for normal people. The implication is that a "normal", well-adjusted person has an arsenal of coping mechanisms at his or her disposal to whip out and fend off whatever attack is imminent...none of these kinds of help deal with the more important sources of stress, burnout, and the deeper problems of anxiety and depression: what we are adapting to and becoming successful at in the first place – the values and attitudes we acquire through our career development and how they affect us[3, emphasis added].

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## Further Reading

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Adrian Carr is Lecturer in Organizational Studies and Change at the University of Western Sydney, Australia.

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