

'The Narcissism of Small Differences': exploring the walls within and between ourselves, groups and organisations and what to do about them.

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Contemporary popular discourse seems preoccupied with conflicts and discrimination as between groups that, for the most part, are readily identifiable, either visibly or by their stated identification of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, political affiliations etc. By contrast, there is little public discourse about the very human way in which we create defensive and often destructive walls between others and ourselves in what Benjamin (2004) describes as 'the confusing traffic of two-way streets' that characterises all human relations. The title of this paper 'the narcissism of small differences' is borrowed from Freud's (1930) observation in Civilisation and its Discontents that hatred seems to be strongest between people with the least observable differences. So while the examination of and work with inter-cultural dynamics as between those of us with visible differences remains an important challenge of our time at societal, national and global levels, this paper will argue that our theory and practice as it examines and works with intra-psychic, interpersonal and intergroup dynamics within organisational contexts can perhaps offer useful insights to the broader challenges and discourse.

In this paper, I will revisit some of the psychoanalytic and systems psychodynamic theories on identity development and interpersonal dynamics as they inform our approach to working with organisations (for example: Klein 1929; Sherwood 1964; Bion 1970; Alford 1989; Benjamin 1995; Miller 2002; Chattopadhyah 2003; Harding 2006). This will be followed by the exploration of a number of case vignettes of consultancies to organisations in which the splitting of 'us' and 'them' as between interdependent working groups created exhausting dynamics of mutual hatred and sometimes bullying that sapped the organisations of their productivity. One of the features of these consultancies that has fascinated me is the splitting as between what I will describe as the 'professional' function and the 'management' function. It seems where individuals invest most strongly in their professional identity of, for example, 'scientist', 'academic', 'doctor', the part of the work that needs to be attacked is the requisite management function that, in reality, sits in every role, but that gets split off into those with roles more readily identifiable as 'management' or 'corporate services'. For individuals it is as if when one identity is to the fore, the other identities not only do not exist, but they come under attack as they can be identified in the 'other'. In addition to the case vignettes, I will draw upon examples from the 2019 NIODA Group Relations Working Conference on the theme, 'Identity, Gender, Authority and Community at Work'. The GRC can function as microcosm of these broader organisational and social dynamics. The GRC experiences served to amplify and further articulate and validate the phenomena as observed in the case vignettes.

What is common to all these cases and examples is the way in which individuals and teams can get locked into a fantasy about an existential threat to identity – as if their very lives depend upon maintaining the fantasy of separateness. What is also common, is the discovery that by bringing parties together to not only 'go on thinking' (Bion), but to go on thinking and relating *together*, the walls, while not altogether dissolved, are able to become more visible and penetrable and the polarised differences to become more fluid. For this to happen, minimum conditions of a good-enough 'container' are required. Time and time again, what is demonstrated is that where the systems psychodynamically informed consultant, researcher or manager can create a safe-enough space in which people can tell their stories, share their fears, explore their differences and, importantly, be in touch with and *tolerate* the feelings of shame that seem to surface in relation to the splitting and projection that has occurred, reparation, recovery and collaboration can begin. It might be argued that the same thing is as true as between individuals as it is for organisational groups and societal groups where splitting and projection has been acted out to destructive effect.

Preliminary Reference List

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Brief Bio

Dr Brigid Nossal is the Deputy CEO and Director, Consulting at the National Institute of Organisation Dynamics Australia (NIODA). Her work straddles academic teaching, research, supervision and organisational consulting. She has been consulting to organisations for over 25 years and for the past 20 years, systems psychodynamics has been central to her work. Brigid is a member of ISPSO (Board member 2016-2019) and Group Relations Australia (CoM 2005 – 2011). She has also worked on and directed Group Relations Conferences in Australia, UK, India and China.