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Paper proposal for ISPSO Conference 2020 - The Walls Within: Working with Defenses against Otherness

Paper title: Are you one of us? Am I worth to be one of them? An 'elite identity' culture that excludes.

Professional services firms, historically, have been associated with a very strong brand as an employer, attracting what is perceived by many as 'very capable people', privately educated and recruited from top universities. Traditionally, these firms' culture are well-known for being highly hierarchical, expectations of working really hard to the highest standards, attracting 'driven and ambitious' individuals and charging expensive daily consulting rates. Equally, for many individuals, (predominantly those with high conscientiousness traits), these firms have been a prestigious, powerful and attractive place to work for, where they feel they fit it.

Along with the perception of a 'prestigious place' to work for, comes the notion of 'elite group' or 'elite identity' (Gill, 2015). The 'elite identity' is partly generated by the organisation ethos (organisational culture, individuals unconsciously colluding with each other) and partly generated by the individuals' ethos working there (intra-psyche dynamics). Arguably creating a reinforcing cycle that rejects and excludes others.

Implicitly the 'elite group' perception creates a sense of distance from others, the non-members, who show weaknesses or vulnerabilities and may not be performing up to the expected high standards of the 'elite group' organisation. Those are the ones who show the symptoms of strain and negative stress.

The creation of an 'elite group' identity is the subtle wall that divides, establishing a 'them and us', an in-and-out group dynamic. Sometimes belongingness here seems to equate to self-worthiness.

These are key findings emerging from my doctorate research linked to how senior leaders, mostly from professional services firms, seek to belong to an 'elite group' organisation to gain worthiness.

The paper will share insights from research and practice on system-psychodynamics underpinning the need for leaders to seek belongingness to a group that is perceived to be superior and how the creation of this 'superior group' can be in itself a defence against anxiety and low self-worthiness.

The paper will explore a cruel and scrutinising culture that divides, rejects and excludes. Feeling validated, accepted and worthy when we belong and excluded, abandoned and worthless when don't belong.

The paper will attempt to explore; what role is the 'elite group' fulfilling? What is the 'elite group' identity representing? What defended-walls are created at an organisation and individual levels in connection with belongingness and self-worthiness in a culture of high performance, targets and scrutiny? What is the impact of building 'elite walls' on individuals' wellbeing?

Author Bio: Veronica Azua

Veronica is an organisational psychologist who has been working globally in leadership development, talent management and coaching for the past decade working in professional services firms as well as in industry.

She has been working in leadership development for the London Business School facilitating group and offering coaching sessions as part of MBAs and EMBA programmes for the past 9 years.

Her passion for psychology and research have led Veronica to studying a professional doctorate researching the impact of self-doubts on leaders in the workplace, which she is currently carrying out.

Her early career background have been initially in psychoanalytical psychotherapy in Argentina where she was born and raised

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