

Author: Erik Van de loo & Saskia de Maat

Metaphors of Success

An object relational exploration of inner walls and doors in young Russian leaders

The psychoanalytic study of success (Freud, 1916) has predominantly explored this through the lens of the Oedipal constellation with ensuing themes such as fear of success, rivalry, oedipal guilt, castration fear, etcetera. H. Segal (1952, 1982) has made an attempt to understand artistic success with the help of object relation theory by linking it to the Paranoid Schizoid (PS) and Depressive (D) position. Artists being in touch with both ‘craziness’ and reality. There is not much research available on what leaders themselves think at an unconscious level and how they construct their personal theme of success. Object relation theory offers us interesting and relevant perspectives on leadership personality and success.

We would like to report the findings of our explorative study on analyzing the unconscious phantasies of success of a sample of 44 Russian Leaders, not older than 35 years old. All 44 in senior leadership roles and positions. In individual semi-structured interviews, they have been asked fifteen questions that triggered their phantasies related to success (for example: “What comes to you your mind when you think about success? What physical feeling do you associate with success? etcetera). This has provided us with a primary dataset of phantasy material and a secondary dataset of counter transference feelings of the interviewers. We have developed a coding framework inspired by the object-relational theory of Melanie Klein and have coded the material based on consensus. The particular focus has been to identify manifestations of Melanie Klein’s differentiation between the PS and the D position.

We will present the findings of our thematic analysis or mapping of these data sets. Although we have coded all the material per individual, we cannot make any interpretations at an individual level. The total sets of data enable us nevertheless to explore potential indications of PS and D elements shaping their metaphors of success. We have shared our framing of the material from an object relational perspective in a session with about half the Russian young leaders.

Our main finding is to have identified the presence of an object relational continuum shaping metaphors of success: 1. Strong enmity (conquering and destroying the other). 2. Adversarial (strongly competitive, winning solo). 3. Success as a team effort. 4. Enabling others to be creative and successful.

Going forward our ambition is:

1. to refine and validate the object relational framework in applying to material outside a clinical psychoanalytical setting
2. to expand the study with Russian leaders of multiple generations
3. to repeat the study in different national contexts
4. to link the unconscious phantasy patterns to how these leaders experience themselves, are experienced by others, take decisions, cope with success, failure and conflict.

Developing more insight into how these unconscious dynamics shape what leaders are striving for, might help to learn how to shift the connections between “walls within” and constructing “walls outside”.

