

In Search of Truth II: The Dance of Collusion

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In our first essay in this series, we noted that experts are not always right in our 21st Century society. This is quite understandable given the abundant complexity, unpredictability, turbulence and even contradiction to be found in our contemporary world (Bergquist, 2019). It is unrealistic to expect that mistakes won't be made in the prescription of cures and prediction of outcomes when it comes to addressing a societal crisis—such as we are now seeing with COVID-19. The big problem we identified in the first essay is that there doesn't seem to be any correctives on the bad expert advice we are receiving. We find that many experts are inflicted with considerable hubris and that the rest of us are enamored with or threatened by the hubris of expertise.

We turned to two narratives when examining this matter of hubris. The first narrative is Don Quixote and his creation of a world that doesn't really exist. We wrote about the mirrors in which Don Quixote saw for the first time his own true nature as an old, dying man. It is in the narcissistic perspectives held by Don Quixote that we find a parallel to the hubris of expertise in our society. Tragedy is inherent in this facing of the truth and we—as Quixotian experts or those who want to embrace the Quixotian world—are shown the mirror of reality.

A second narrative enables us to even more deeply explore the dynamics of narcissism. Specially, we turn to the myth of Narcissus itself. At one level, we can understand something about the way in which Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in the pond. This is what happens when an expert “falls in love” with his or her own knowledge and experience. What is often forgotten is that there is a second character in the myth of Narcissus. This is Echo, who sees Narcissus and is immediately enthralled. It is at this point that Echo loses his/her own voice and never speaks again in his/her life. The important lesson to be gained from this myth is not only that we can easily be enthralled with our own expertise, but that as witnesses to someone else's expertise, we can become mute. The expertise is accepted without reservation or critique. The reflection in the pool is never disturbed and truth becomes immune to any challenge or compromise. It is at this point that we move to the topic of this second essay: the dance of collusion.

The Nature of Collusion

In reflecting on the source and reinforcement of narcissism and the hubris to be found among corona experts, we specifically propose that it is important to acknowledge collusion as a critical contributing factor. While an expert can go quite a way in convincing other people to accept their wisdom and predications, it is equally important for these other people to eagerly embrace this wisdom and the resulting predictions---especially in the anxiety-filled setting that is common today during the pandemic era. A powerful process called collusion is operating when the expert and advice-follower dance together in creating an illusion of knowledge and foresight. Collusion is a complex and often subtle process, typically involving all parties in a relationship or group. Even if a participant is not actively involved in the collusion, the mere acquiescence to the collusion will exacerbate the collusive process. This insight is offered in a famous childhood story about the Emperor wearing no clothes. No one observing the parade route said anything about the emperor's nudity. It was only the child who spoke up. This is a key point. To simply not say anything about what is happening in front of one's own eyes is participation in the collusion.

We find this operating, for instance, among those people who witness a crime. All too frequently, no one steps up to interrupt a crime—or even call the police to prevent the crime or enable the police to apprehend the criminal. Researchers have found that when many people observe a crime there is less likelihood that any one person will attempt to break up or report the crime. (Aronson, 2018) The sense of responsibility is distributed among many people and no one person accepts enough share of the responsibility to precipitate action. There is no son-in-law to hold the mirror up to the Don. Everyone is colluding (and in some sense collaborating) in non-action. In many ways, the Corona virus is a crime being observed by the entire world. We are all a bit afraid of questioning the authority of anyone with impressive credentials. After all, who are we to speak up or report the “crime” of inaccurate information and prediction based on the siloed perspective of the expert. Like Echo we withhold our voice.

Fear and Collusion

Collusion is usually a dynamic involving everyone in a group or organization. The collusion is typically driven by a powerful emotion: (1) fear that one will be ostracized from the relationship or

group for disrupting the collusion by making an inappropriate comment or violating the norms of the system (“the emperor wears no clothes!”); (2) fear that confronting the collusion could lead to psychological or physical retribution (“you have destroyed the sanity of our Don and must pay for this betrayal!”); (3) fear that there will be tit-for-tat (if you reveal something about me, then I will reveal something about you) (“how would you like it if I held a mirror up in front of your face!”); or (4) fear that I might be wrong and that what I see is really more about me than about what is happening in the relationship or group (“it is you who are naked, not the emperor!”).

At other times, the collusion occurs because no one is really aware that the collusion is in operation. It is assumed that the collusive process is simply “the ways things are done around here”. This “natural” rationale is related to what Daniel Kahneman (2013) and other behavioral economists call “heuristics.” Unchallenged, “natural” heuristics are prevalent when the collusion involves race or gender, while the rationale regarding “the way things are done around here” is typically found in a setting with a very “thick” or “enmeshed” culture (where most of the behavior is dictated by a set of implicit and strongly enforced norms). These heuristics are also in full force when the level of anxiety is high—as is the case during our current health care crisis.

This lack of awareness tends to be closely interrelated with and enhanced by the dynamic of fear. We are most likely to be driven toward unawareness regarding that which is ultimately most fearful. Sigmund Freud (1990) pointed out many years ago, that we are aware at some level of that which we are unaware. We must know in some manner that something exists and is very scary (anxiety-provoking) if we are to “repress” and become unaware of it. To point back to an obvious example, the crowd must have been aware at some level that the emperor was naked and that to comment on the nudity could get them in trouble. They would not have been fearful of making a critical comment if they were not aware of both factors. The child wasn’t the only one to see that the emperor was naked; however, the child was the only one not to know (or at least not to assume) that it would be a bad thing to comment on the emperor’s nudity.

Projective Identification and Collusion

With this overview of the collusion process in place, we wish to dig a bit deeper, using some psychodynamic terminology. Basically, collusion begins to take place through something called *projective identification*. Collusion occurs in a society when citizens project specific “objects”

(images, assumptions, personality characteristics) onto their leader. In our present circumstance, the leader might be a medical expert or public health administrator. Why do we engage this projective process? It is because these are aspects of ourselves (“internal objects”) that we refuse to recognize. These include our own fears, our own anger, our own arrogance—even our own competence and wisdom. We don’t accept it in ourselves, because to do so would make us anxious.

The acceptance might even make us feel personally responsible for some decision to be made or action to be taken:

“What if I am mistaken?”

“What if other people rely on me and I lead them astray?”

If I acknowledge this in myself, it might make me feel bad about myself:

“I don’t want to be an angry person.”

“I don’t want to appear arrogant.”

“I don’t want to feel afraid or appear to be a fool or coward.”

By placing the praise or blame on their leader, members of a society can take it off themselves. Furthermore, the leader usually has some personal reason to accept this projection. The identification is, in other words, “sticky.” The leader is not a Velcro Don on whom nothing adheres for very long. The leader feels a bit afraid himself, and thus readily accepts assumption made by other members of the organization that he is very much afraid. The leader at some level believes that she is very competent and courageous (or would at least like to think of herself as competent and courageous). Thus, she welcomes the admiration and assumptions of competence and courage assigned by other members of her organization. This acceptance of praise and assumed mastery is particularly prevalent (and destructive) among those leaders who are enmeshed during highly anxious times in the hubris of virus expertise.

Role Suction and Collusion

The collusion is further reinforced by the overall culture of an organization or society. Commonly held projections on leaders (as dissenters, visionaries, fight leaders, flight leaders, jokesters, etc.) will reinforce projections onto any one person:

“This expert really knows what she is saying. We must be guided by her wisdom and experience!”

“All the elected representatives in this country are corrupt and self-serving!”

“He really knows what to anticipate and has a clear vision of our future after the pandemic comes to an end.”

“She is just another one of those damned fools that the other party elected.”

“You know, physicians always operate this way.”

“All of those epidemiologists are nothing more than numbers crunchers.”

These culture-based (and systemic) clusters of assumptions and expectations lead to something called Role Suction. Certain functions (both formal and informal) in the organization or society lead to certain repeated patterns that are sustained (self-fulfilling prophecies) by certain projections. “Actors” are assigned a specific role in the organizational or societal “play”. They cannot easily shift to a different role. Other members of the organization or society readily join in the play, as supporting characters, colluding with the principle actor in sustaining the play. As Kets de Vries (2003, p. 75) notes in dramatic fashion, the role player (particularly the imposter) “like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, seems to weave a magic spell, and people are only too ready to follow. Imposters [and other role-suctioned actors] seem to be able to awaken otherwise dormant tendencies within us by which we can be carried away, blinded to reality.”

It is something of a vicious circle regarding culture, collusion and projective identifications. The organization or society tends to attract and hold leaders with certain “favorite” projections. Furthermore, there are what psychologists call Secondary Gains associated with the collusions and projective identifications. It is not just that members of the organization feel less anxious or less responsible when they project certain characteristics onto their leaders or other role players. Something else (and often more powerful) is operating. Something constructive (for at least some members of the organization or society) is gained from this collusive process:

“The Boss pays more attention to me (us) because of the praise we offer.”

“It is important for our senator to always be the realist, otherwise we are likely to move in the wrong direction.”

“Thank goodness, Susan brings up the issues of inequitable distribution of protective masks whenever the committee is convened.”

The only problem with these secondary gains is that one person is often stuck in (and limited to) a specific role. They must assume responsibility for a specific problem—and nothing more. Furthermore, the organization or society gets stuck: there is no growth on the part of its members and not much collective learning, let alone much genuine growth in the organization or society's collective intelligence.

Schismogenesis and Collusion

We want to mention several other outcomes of collusion. Many years ago, the noted social analyst, Gregory Bateson (1987, pp. 61-72) wrote about something he called schismogenesis. This big word refers to the tendency for two systems (organizations, tribes, nations) to relate to one another in a manner that drives the two systems further apart from one another or that leads to escalation (power law) of similar activities in both systems. One type of schismogenesis is called *Complementary*, meaning that as a specific system goes in one direction, the other system goes in the opposite direction. For instance, as one tribe becomes more belligerent and active, the other tribe becomes more passive and withdrawn. We see this occurring in conversations about the COVID-19 virus. The experts become more confident (arrogant) in their predictions and the general anxiety-ridden public becomes more dependent on these predictions. Both parties are colluding in making the expert's confident statements appear to be justifiable and acceptable. This complementary form of collusion tends to be long-lasting and it is deeply embedded, as a rule, in the operating heuristics and culture of an organization or society.

The second type of schismogenic collusion identified by Bateson is called *Symmetrical*. As one system exhibits higher levels of a specific behavior, the other system will try to match this level. For instance, if one nation builds more rockets, then the rival nation will also have to build more rockets—the classic arms race. In an organizational or societal setting, this symmetrical dynamic operates when two parties with different perspectives on a social issue (such as public policies regarding the virus) tend to become more convinced of their own position and increasingly assert the stupidity or self-serving nature of the other party's position. This symmetrical process of collusion is often what we mean by the "vicious circle." It is characterized by exponential growth (the "power law" of contemporary chaos and complexity theorists) and will lead quickly to explosion and collapse. We typically, don't find symmetrical collusion to be long-lasting in

organizations or societies. Rather, we are likely to witness escalation, collapse and then a renewal of the symmetrical collusion with new parties being invited to engage in this dance of symmetrical collusion. This dance is likely to be particularly dangerous and destructive when it is being engaged among those formulating policies regarding the current pandemic.

Conclusions

Up to this point, we have focused primarily on the impact of hubris and narcissism on the quality of decisions being made and the impact of collusion on the dynamics of organizations and entire societies. What about the impact of the hubris, narcissism and collusion on the individual who is living in the challenging world of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence? What happens to each of us when we rely on expertise that is inaccurate or incomplete? Do we feel betrayed or simply foolish? Like Echo, do we lose our voice and even more basically our sense of self-worth? Can we find our voice again and what role should each of us play as articulate participants at table where important dialogue is engaged, and a new shared truth is constructed? We turn to these matters in our third and final essay.

References

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