Anxiety, Learning and 'Goalodicy':

The Search for Weapons of Mass Destruction

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Introduction

This paper contributes to that aspect of the study of organizational learning concerned with organizational defenses against learning (Argyris, 1990). We develop further insights about individual and collective experience in groups (teams) and the organizational dynamics that arise from and reinforce experience. We bring together two threads of research in organizational learning in order to understand better the dynamics of destructive and defensive behavior, its impact on organizing and on the organization of learning. The first research thread highlights the breakdown of learning through 'destructive goal pursuit' (Kayes, 2005; 2006). The second thread shows aspects of the relationship between anxiety and learning both for individual members of an organization (Vince, 1996) and in terms of the organization of learning (Vince and Saleem, 2004).

In broader terms, this paper is part of an ongoing research project to explore emotional, social and political processes within the context of learning and organizing (Vince, 2004). While goal setting is a rational process for achieving a desired future state, it may also need to be understood as a process of *rationalisation* of emotional experience, one that uses goal setting as a way of reducing anxiety both in teams and in organizations. This understanding helps us to further develop the concept of 'goalodicy' as an organizational dynamic that has consequences for organizational behavior, organizational design and (in relation to this paper) organizational learning.

We illustrate our discussion of defenses against learning and destructive goal pursuit by reflecting on the espoused justification for the Invasion of Iraq (to find weapons of mass destruction). Our exploration of this global event allows us to illustrate and to critique the concept of 'goalodicy' (Kayes, 2004), a concept that we believe can help to understand the organizational experience of defensive and destructive dynamics, as well as how these can inhibit the organization of learning.

This paper is exploratory in the sense that it further develops the concept of goalodicy and proposes the invasion of Iraq as a plausible illustrative example. Consider the following:

> *"The activities we have detected do not, however, add up to a compelling case that Iraq is currently pursuing what [The Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research] would consider to be an integrated and comprehensive approach to acquire nuclear weapons. Iraq may be doing so, but [The Assistant Secretary] considers the available evidence inadequate to support such a judgment"* (p. 9).

This statement, excerpted from the *National Intelligence Estimate, Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction* (October, 2002), provides us with a starting point from which to explore 'goalodicy' because it points to an important piece of information that was ignored in the build up to the invasion of Iraq by United States and British lead forces. The primary justification of the invasion arose from intelligence that Iraq was attempting to acquire, indeed was in the process of constituting and had the intent to use, nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. The so called 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' (WMD) argument served as a central justification for the war from both the United States and the British. We argue that the justification for the invasion of Iraq was informed by a process of 'goalodicy', a process characterized by seven warning signs that can be associated with the phenomenon.

The organization of the paper is as follows. We begin by describing the concept of 'goalodicy' (which we see as a specific form of destructive goal pursuit) and describe its theoretical and practical implications for learning and organizing. Second, we describe how 'goalodicy' is linked to social defenses against anxiety – the idea that unconsciously, people come together in support of each others' defensiveness, and that such defensiveness becomes structured in organizational policies, practices and assumptions. Third, we apply this thinking to the search for Weapons of Mass Destruction prior to the invasion of Iraq to suggest that goalodicy provides a plausible explanation for some of the organizing processes that were part of the build up and justification of war. The paper argues that defensive and destructive dynamics fuel the pursuit of goals, despite compelling evidence that such pursuit will result in negative and undesired consequences.

Finally, we link our discussion back to the theme of organizational learning, showing how goalodicy blocks opportunities for the organization of learning.

Goalodicy

Goalodicy is a term used to describe the situation where the process of goal setting and pursuit leads to unintended negative consequences (Kayes, 2005). Goalodicy arises when an organization or key leaders within the organization identify closely with a future, as yet unachieved goal. Goalodicy serves as a means for rationalizing current anxieties in terms of future ideal states (Kayes, 2004b). Thus, goalodicy is defined here as the process whereby individuals, groups and organizations resolve anxiety by looking to future, often utopian states. Goalodicy takes hold when an organization begins to act as if it has achieved its stated goal, even though it has not, in actuality, accomplished the stated goal. As a result, negative consequences begin to ensure. 'Goalodicy' contains the conflation of two words, theodicy and goals. Briefly, a theodicy arises in a situation where lived experience fails to live up to normative expectations (see Kayes, forthcoming). Theodicy emerges as an explanation to the discrepancy between experience and expectation. A goal is a future desired state or outcome. Typically, once a goal has been established, organizations devote resources and direct attention to achieve the goal. Thus, goalodicy describes a situation where expectation of achieving a goal fails to materialize.

Goalodicy is a neologism. As a neologism it provides a word to describe the often experienced but little understood situation where organizations act as if a goal has been achieved. Indeed, under conditions of goalodicy organizations become more likely to devote resources to the accomplishment of a goal, even though there may be developing evidence that attaining the goal will result in unintended and negative consequences. The term goalodicy was initially introduced to describe how goals, as future ideal states, can limit learning in organizations (Kayes, 2004). By focusing individual attention and organizational resources on narrowly defined outcomes, goals facilitate narrow minded action in pursuit of goals, with little consideration for their consequences. Thus, goalodicy highlights that goals, despite their positive effects, also constrain actions and can have a coercive impact on opinions and decisions.

Destructive goal pursuit emerges as learning breaks down. Learning is undermined when extant beliefs about the future take precedence over the search for new alternatives and knowledge (Kayes, 2004a). Strong beliefs about a future state of events can lead teams within organizations to rationalize current anxieties in terms of the future achievement of goals. When organizational groups rationalize anxieties, they become locked in pursuit of a single and limited course of action to its own detriment. For example, Kayes (2004a) described how the goal of reaching the summit of Mt. Everest, was so closely held by a group of climbers that they ignored important warning signs that there were problems with the expedition. Ultimately, a group of climbers continued to pursue their goal or reaching the summit long after other climbers had abandoned their ascent. In the end, many of the climbers actually reached the summit, but died on their way down. This incident highlights several key characteristics of goalodicy. First, the climbers identified closely with a future (and as yet) unattained goal of reaching the summit of the world's highest mountain. Second, the goal itself became the driving force for action. The people involved abandoned learning, development and even critical thinking in favor of achieving the goal. Third, the goal was achieved, but it was achieved at a harrowing cost: the lives of eight climbers.

Anxiety

In this section of the paper we explore the concept of 'goalodicy' in terms of the experience of anxiety both for individuals within organizations and in terms of the social and political structures that are created from anxiety. In order to explain anxiety in relation to individuals' experience within organizations it is useful to consider the etymology of the word. Anxiety (as well as the words anger and anguish) comes from the Latin root *angere*, which means to choke, to throttle. In one sense therefore, anxiety can be understood as a constriction of ones ability to breath (and to speak); an experience that chokes the self and stifles relationships, sustaining a feeling of being apart both from oneself and from others. In practice, anxiety is integral both to learning and to the refusal to learn. Anxiety supports learning because it is associated with taking risks and with the struggle to form new insights from experience within organizations. Anxiety undermines

learning because it is associated with not taking risks, with the avoidance of learning and with 'willing ignorance' about experience within organizations (Vince, 1996).

Of particular interest in the further development of the concept of goalodicy is research that has revealed and explained social defenses against anxiety within organizations (Menzies, 1959; Gilmore and Krantz, 1990; Bain, 1998). Social defenses against anxiety imply a system of (unconscious) relationships that are reflected in the structure of an organization. Social defenses emerge when organizational members rely on established structures (e.g. existing rules, regulations and procedures) and on expected or characteristic rationalizations of experience. For example, this would include the repetitive use of problem solving routines like 'SWOT Analysis' (meaning: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) without regard to whether this method is appropriate to the complexity of an issue/ experience. Another example of repetitive routines, directly related to goal setting, involves the setting of "SMART" Goals (which stands for Strategic, Measurable, Attainable, Results-Oriented, and Time-Bound). Such structures offer poor 'containment' for learning, often undermining both individual reflection and the organization of reflection. These structures restrict the availability and flow of learning between individuals because they reaffirm existing beliefs rather than subject them to critical reflection. More importantly, these rationalized routines limit reflection and lack of reflection reinforces social defenses, allowing these to inform expected 'ways of working' in an organization.

These expected or characteristic ways of working evolved originally to minimize anxiety (shame, guilt, envy, anger, etc.) and to reassure organizational members of the safety and 'sanity' inherent in organizational experience. However, when social defenses become dominant they also become dysfunctional for the organization as a whole because these defenses support organizational members' detachment from their experience. The organizational norm is therefore primarily rational, and individuals become emotionally uninvolved from their own affects and experiences. Social defenses do initially reduce anxiety, but they also eventually 'replace compassion, empathy, awareness and meaning with control and impersonality' (Kets de Vries, 2004: 198).

Social defenses have been discussed and analyzed on three inter-connected levels. First, social defenses that reflect experience within a single institution (Menzies, 1959) -

organizational members make use of organizing processes in the struggle against anxiety, leading to the development of structures, procedures and roles that are designed to support their defensive needs. Second, the idea of 'domain defenses', whereby 'pervasive social themes and emergent trends in the wider society are imported into organizations in such a way as to serve as social defenses' (Gilmore and Krantz, 1990: 187). In this particular case managerialism and heroic leadership were the themes/ trends identified. Finally, the idea of 'system domain defenses' (Bain, 1998), which recognizes that organizations are not stand-alone systems, that social defenses are created that characterize particular institutional domains (e.g. Health Service organizations). This means that defenses are not only created from procedures, policies and roles, but also from (e.g.) professional associations and training, funding arrangements, the knowledge base and defined capabilities/ competences. In all three perspectives, what is important is that: 'the concept of social defenses links the individual and collective levels of activity. It is both psychological and social at the same time and provides a way of seeing the reciprocal interaction of the two' (Gilmore and Krantz, 1990: 186).

In this paper our link is between a global, social theme (WMD) and how this theme is reflected in and structures destructive/ defensive dynamics within organizations. The pursuit of goals takes place within and through established and emerging organizational politics and power relations. This is recognized in the term 'political relatedness' (Seivers, 2001), which acknowledges both the psycho-social and the political dynamics that are mobilized by anxiety as individual and collective experience. In the next section of this paper we explore psycho-social and political processes of goalodicy as a form of anxiety reduction in response to a specific example, the 'war against terror' and particularly the futile search for 'weapons of mass destruction'.

The Search for Weapons of Mass Destruction

A recent headline of *The Washington Post* read: *"U.S. Lowers Sights on What Can Be Achieved in Iraq: Administration Is Shedding 'Unreality' That Dominated Invasion, Official Says'*. This headline appeared on August 14, 2005 (Wright & Knickmeyer, 2005). The fact that this headline of 'doubt' and 'unreality' appeared over two years after the build up and invasion is important. As this headline suggests, the

invasion of Iraq by US/British lead forces may provide a unique example of goalodicy because it highlights how the belief in an idealized future is difficult to abandon. The strength of the conviction that Iraq held WMD emerged from a theory about the future. This theory served as the basis to generate present action, as well as to justify future setbacks and problems. Specifically, the belief that WMD would be found in Iraq provided the justification for invasion. In this way, the belief in WMD constituted a goalodicy, a justification for action based on a strong, nearly irreversible belief that the invasion of Iraq would make the world safer, and thus, less anxiety ridden.

Source of Data

Our analysis relied on publicly available archival data. Much of this data was obtained through the Freedom of Information Act through the National Security Archives housed at the George Washington University. The primary source of information that supported the hypothesis that Iraq was moving forward with WMD programs was found in the document from which this opening quote was pulled. This document, often referred to as the 'October 2002 Intelligence Estimate' was classified until July 2003. Although only 14 of the original 94 pages of this report were released, due to national security concerns by the Central Intelligence Agency, the 14 pages were instructive in that they included both a summary of the findings, an estimate of various threats (as either High, Moderate or Low confidence) and an alternative estimate provided by the United States Department of State.

Analysis also included a similar document produced by the British Government, "Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction, The Assessment by the British Government", popularly known as "The Dossier". The analysis also included U.S. Government documents and news paper reports, magazine articles, and televised documentaries.

Seven Warning Signs in the Search for WMD

Kayes (2005; 2006) outlines seven warning signs that are linked to the emergence of goalodicy. Using the search for WMD, we revisit these seven characteristics of goalodicy and provide evidence reported in the popular press and published interviews

with decision makers that support the hypothesis that the search for WMD is consistent with goalodicy.

1) *Narrowly defined goal - Priority is given, almost exclusively, to one course of action.*
The Bush administration set the goal of "regime change" in Iraq as early as 2001. While a secondary goal, installation of a democratic state in Iraq, installation of a democratic state, or regime change, was given as the primary, albeit narrow, goal (Woodward, 2004). Blair devotes British troops to the Iraq invasion. Despite opposition for this action both within his party and among other parties in Parliament, party members remain unable to gain a coalition to challenge his position—despite opinion polls and the little support shown by Parliament for the war (Stothard, 2003).

2) *Idealized future - Create a romanticized picture of what the world will look like after the goal is achieved.*
The administration argued that regime change will create a democratic state—an argument that focuses attention on a future, idealized goal. The description contained little consideration of the unintended consequences of a leaderless country, the complications of occupying a recently "liberated" country, the possibility of resistance by internal parties, the ethnic and political factions throughout the country, or the cultural implications of democratic elections.

3) *Goal-driven justification - Justify current actions in terms of the future achievement of goals.*
The Bush and Blair administrations justified the invasion of Iraq on the rationale that finding weapons of mass destruction (WMD), such as nerve, biological, and even nuclear agents, was a "slam dunk." (Woodward, 2004). U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell made WMD the explicit case for war at the United Nations in February 2003.

4) *Public expectation - Failure to accomplish the goal would be met by public perception of failure.*

By escalating the need and threat of war up until March 2003, the U.S.-Britain–led coalition set the public expectation of an "inevitable" victory. Blair responds to critics by saying, "That we will encounter more difficulties and anxious moments in the days ahead is certain. But no less certain, indeed more so, is a collation victory."

5) *Achieving destiny -Achieving the goal is conceived in terms of "rightfulness" and "destiny."*
Conversely, not achieving the goal would be perceived as evil. Bush deliberately creates a duality of good versus evil in his January 2003 State of the Union address by using the term "axis of evil" to label countries with ties to terrorism. The phrase draws on religious themes of destiny and victory over evil. There is a tendency during the goal-setting process to characterize the attainment of a goal as a good-versus-evil struggle of destiny. This dichotomous thinking was made clear in Bush's "axis of evil" speech. According to insiders, the speech was specifically designed to build support for the war on terrorism and to justify future military actions.

6) *Limited course of action - Priority is given, almost exclusively, to one course of action.*
Once a course of action has been determined and a goal has been established, little further exploration or learning take place and few additional options. This warning sign could be seen in the increasingly limited options that officials entertained in the time leading up to war, acting almost as if they had already decided on a course of action, despite what evidence or new events might develop. As U. S. Secretary of State Colin Powel expressed his lack of optimism on future developments "I think the window is closing rapidly. I think if we do not see a rather remarkable and unexpected change . . . I'm not expecting it – then I think the probability of war is rapidly increasing" (MSNBC, 2003).

7) *Face-saving behavior - If initial steps to achieve the goal are met with resistance or failure, the pursuit is again justified in terms of its future achievement.*
In the subsequent pursuit of regime change in Iraq, when several unintended consequences arose, such as local uprisings and resistance, officials reiterated rather than retreated from the goal. In the face of falling public support in terms of both approval

ratings and public support for the war, both administrations focused attention away from the consequences and instead on the future to create "momentum in a different direction" that "will be about the future." The White House launches a campaign to 'create a movement in a different direction', to 'start talking about the future not the past'.

Taken together, these seven warning signs, present in the build up to and justification for invasion of Iraq provide evidence that goalodicy may be a plausible explanation for the build up to war. The goalodicy hypothesis deserves greater attention and more evidence is still required to build a stronger argument, but based on this initial evidence it seems appropriate at this point to consider the relationship between goalodicy, anxiety and the search for WMD. Anxieties about the inability to control and to moderate 'evil' behavior and to respond to terrorism became a global concern. Social defenses against this threat were being built from the idea that the peace and stability of the world depends on the resolute action of the only remaining super-power and its allies against an evil dictator who provides support for terrorists. However, actions have to be found that do not themselves overly threaten global stability. Ideally, this involves the creation of a limited or contained conflict, providing a tangible context within which right ('the war against terror') can be served. The search for WMD in Iraq offered a *rational* focal point for the UK/US in response to the threat of terrorism because WMD are a cause of global anxiety and it is easy to see that any or all WMD have a global impact.

Implications

In this section we reflect on the value of the concept of goalodicy in questioning the assumptions that give rise to actions, as well as to the justification of future ideal states. The concept of goalodicy contributes to thinking about organizational learning because it brings to the forefront of discussion two limitations of goal setting. Next we reflect on some of the limitations of the concept of goalodicy. Finally, we consider how the lessons learned from the futile search for WMD can apply in the context of learning, managing and organizing.

Goalodicy and Organizational Learning

Goalodicy brings to the forefront of discussion, the notion that the rational process of goal setting can lead to irrational behavior. In fact, the consistent rationalization of emotions in light of goals often creates irrational behavior itself because it limits learning. There are three primary reasons that goalodicy tends to limit learning in organizations.

First, goalodicy reinforces existing goals at the expense of learning. Said another, more abstract way, goalodicy reinforces existing social norms. Because goalodicy reassures and condones the value of continued goal pursuit, it reinforces the status quo (both in political terms and in relation to the 'organization-in-the-mind'). Goalodicy works because members of the organization already identify with the goal and its values. Continued reliance on the goal reinforces this identification with the idealized future and perpetuates anxiety over the discrepancy between lived experienced and the normative goal.

The second implication is that goalodicy tends to reinforce existing power relationships. This is achieved because it gives explanation to existing anxieties. Goalodicy tends to reinforce a person's existing 'place' or role in the social order. If nothing else, goals provide a connection between existing realities and future, as yet unachieved ideals. This connection between existing realities, which are full of anxiety can easily be rationalized away with the promise of a future free from such anxiety. Goalodicy serves to distract individuals from their current situation in hopes of a better, anxiety free future. This distraction benefits those in power because it gives both a rationalization for present fears as well as hope of eliminating those fears in the near future. While the idealized future does provide some comfort, the release of anxiety is short lived as new anxieties and fears inevitably arise again. As organizational members become satisfied with these existing explanations for their anxieties and their desired resolution in some future state, existing power relationships are reinforced.

Consider for example, how the existence of WMDs was used to build a case for the invasion of Iraq. The search for WMD became the justification for invasion because it exploited existing fears about the connection between Iraq, global terrorism and the use of WMD. As United States Secretary of State Colin Powell asserted:

"We have see connections and we're continuing to pursue those connections. We're not resting out whole case on this linkage. We're resting our case for the necessity perhaps of going to war on the fact that Saddam Hussein has developed weapons of mass destruction, has them in his possession, . . . (MSNBC, 2003)

Statements such as this perpetuated the fear of terrorism that continued to persist despite the estimation by the intelligence community, that it was a low probability that Iraq would not use WMD unless provoked to do so and that it would share resources with terrorist (National Intelligence Estimate, 2002; p. 9). Even months after the invasion and after little to no evidence surfaced that Iraq possessed WMDs, public opinion polls showed strong belief (just under 50 %) that Iraq had WMDs and was linked to terrorists.

A third important consequence of goalodicy lies in its tendency to limit critical thinking and the consideration of multiple perspectives. This limitation arises from the fact that goalodicy relies on a dualistic thinking about the nature of problems. Since goalodicy rests on a good versus evil premise, that actions can be interpreted using only this limited framework, goalodicy limits the exploration of other options or alternative explanations. For example, the consistent good versus evil theme that grew during the lead up to war had the impact of limiting debate on alternative methods to enforce UN resolutions about the accumulation of WMD.

Limitations of Goalodicy

Goalodicy is a concept that draws attention to one way that goals may limit learning. There are three primary limitations to such a concept.

First, while goalodicy focuses attention on the limits of goal setting as a rational process, it remains important to recognize that not all goal setting and pursuit leads to negative consequences and necessarily limits learning. For example, envisioning future states and seeking ways to achieve them encourages optimism and motivates action which can foster knowledge creation. That goalodicy is a potential consequence of goals setting and pursuit does not diminish the value of goal-setting under certain conditions.

Second, goalodicy offers an interpretive framework to identify and possibly forestall destructive goal pursuit. As an interpretive, retrospective process of sensemaking, goalodicy might be enlisted as an easy answer to explain various events. Thus, goalodicy

risks fueling the same kind of unproductive anxiety reducing behavior that it intends to surface. It seems that an interpretive framework called 'goalodicy' offers its own potential unintended consequences when it is accepted as an easy explanation for events.

Third, as an abstract concept, goalodicy offers an explanation for action that may be divorced from the direct experience of those in organizations. Thus, a second unintended or negative consequence arises. Because goalodicy offers an abstract (e.g. , idealized) notion, embracing the concept of goalodicy may further divorce individuals from their experience in organizations.

Implications for Organizations

We claim that the search in organizations for general capabilities is often justified through a process of goalodicy; that this is likely to be a futile search; and that such a search can lead to the implementation of processes and practices that can undermine organizational learning. Behind the rationalizations, planning, justifications and actions that lead to the pursuit of goals lie psychological and social processes hidden from immediate view.

Conclusions

Organizations are not detached from the social and political forces that surround them. Our experience within organizations is necessarily touched by world events such as 'the war on terror' (now called 'the long war'), and we can only speculate and imagine the extent to which these events find their ways into our individual and organizational lives as an unconscious response to destruction and the fear of destruction. It is likely that organizational experience and dynamics will reflect societal themes and concerns, and that these themes will inform even those processes (like the pursuit of goals) that seem explicitly to be about making the future manageable.

Social defenses arise as a result of our need to block the 'profound innovations' (Gilmore and Krantz, 1990) that have to be created in order for organizational learning to occur. Goalodicy is a way of describing the self-justifying behavior that is necessary to avoid the complexities of relations, thought and action that are demanded by learning. It expresses the desire in organizations to rationalize anxieties and to use goal setting as a

way of managing them. The paper argues that defensive and destructive dynamics fuel the pursuit of goals, despite compelling evidence that such pursuit will result in negative and undesired consequences. This understanding helps us to explain and to develop the concept of 'goalodicy' as an organizational dynamic that has consequences for organizational learning.

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