WHAT CHARACTERIZES SOCIAL DEFENSE SYSTEMS?

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ABSTRACT

A study among school teachers showed that a "social defence system" (Menzies Lyth, 1959) develops in the school in response to a threat to the teacher's identity. The need for defence stems from emotions experienced by the professional, which are difficult to articulate, cope with and finds solutions to. Together with an external pressure on efficiency a system develops that is resistant to change and prohibit the workers from performing their main tasks.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Occupational groups like nurses, social workers and teachers belong to occupational groups called relational workers (Moos et. al 2004), i.e. the professions who see their relationships with other people as a crucial part of their work. Relationships are reported to be at the heart of professional and personal health as well as learning (West 2001). Within these work groups the relation is something different than common contact between people, and the relation is aimed towards being a tool in solving the problem of the client (Stolanowski & Rønnestad 1997). Relational workers are found within Human Service Organizations (HSO). Hasenfield (1983) has stated some characteristics distinct for Human Service Organizations. People are the "raw material" which means, *"the core activities of the organization are structured to process, sustain or change people who come under its jurisdiction"*. Within this work it is difficult to predict the outcome of actions because the reactions of clients or responses of staff are not fully controllable. Due to the special characteristics of the relation work, such work may be saturated with emotions. It has been stated that research in general has neglected the impact of everyday emotions in organizational life (Ashforth & Humphrey 1995). Focusing especially on the emotional part of relation work is therefore needed.

For many years I have explored the special demands connected to relational work Ramvi 1996; 1998; 2007). This paper is in the main based on data collected in my PhD project (2007) were I studied teachers.

2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

To study relation work I have used a psychoanalytic framework, especially I have found it useful to relate psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's concept of "learning from experience" (Bion 1962, (1991)) to relation workers' daily lives. Bion's theory of an emotional experience gives primary weight to the inner world, and his theory is a part of the object relations tradition.

In everyday speech we often talk of learning from experience in a different way from how Bion understands it. I would say that when we in ordinary speech talk of learning from experience, we mostly think of confirming previous experience (Levine 2002). However, we would be more in line with Bion's understanding of learning if we say that learning is getting involved in what one doesn't know (Vince 2001). Bion's theory of learning is interesting because he also includes the fact that we don't always want to know. He says that we unconsciously avoid or resist knowledge. We seek minus knowledge, -K, as he calls it. Failure to learn from experience is in other words linked to fear of thinking. Instead, we prefer to get involved in what we do know. This results in thoughtless actions, impulse actions or action as a means of avoiding thinking. To learn from experience as Bion describes it**,** we need to put in some hard mental work - we must be able to recognise, and think about, our own emotions.

In my perspective, then, thinking and learning is about the ability to endure and contain the frustration of not knowing. There is always a frustrating aspect to thoughts**,** says Bion, as there is to all insight. This is why thinking is difficult. This is the core of psychoanalytic theory. If we seek Knowledge, K or -K is about whether we can contain the pain connected

with the frustration of not knowing, or whether we can contain the pain which is inherent in reality. The containing process may be replaced by defence. On the basis of my PhD study, it may look as if teachers struggled to endure the pain and frustration associated with their relationships to the students. Feelings became separated from experience and therefore they cannot, according to Bion, become thoughts. Bion understands experience, learning and thinking as one integrated process.

And this is what he calls learning from experience or emotional learning. In his theory thinking is a continuous transformation of emotions and experience, which irrevocably changes the thinker and his/her perception of inner and outer reality (White 2002). The process of learning from experience is therefore considered as a personal development.

With the same model, Bion (1961, (1996)), also describes development or anti-development in groups, Work Groups and Basic Assumptions Groups. On a Basic Assumptions level, the group culture is suffused with unspoken and unconscious assumptions shared by all the group members. In contrast the members of the Work group address the consciously defined and accepted task of the group. A shift in focus is yet presence on the two level; observing individuals and observing groups. I will turn back to this later in this paper since it has to do with the relationship between individual and organizational learning.

2.1 What does this theory says about learning?

Bion's way of understanding learning from experience indicates that all learning takes place in or through relationships. This view of learning is Bion's fundamental understanding, and the fundamental understanding for the object relation theory, but the same views are also to be found in many other traditions. Within this view different terminology is used to describe learning, but in any case, learning stands for expansion and growth, and involves the ability to "hold" more and more experience (French 1997:486,487). As a contrast, French suggests those with a linear understanding of learning; those who define learning as having knowledge of pre-defined competence or skills. French states that this is a view of competence which reflects today's culture of achievement, measured in terms of input/output, and determined by principle of usefulness, natural science and market ideology (ibid).

In light of Bion's theory, one can say that no relationship can be uncontaminated by primitive impulses. From this point of view it is essential that a teacher interact with students, parents, colleagues and the leadership in such a way that the ability to think, learn from experience and thus act professionally is developed (or learned). In my PhD project, I explored what supported teachers in learning from experience. In the same way, I also searched for obstacles, and factors which attack thinking (Bion 1959) both on an individual and a group level.

By taking this psychoanalytic perspective in my studies I take a double perspective; hence I investigate the core of the relation workers work and similarly understand the work environment, social culture and structure as distinctive characters of the work. The individual characteristics, cultures and expectations of the relation workers are shaped in the meeting between the structures of the work place and the work processes.

By taking a psychoanalytic approach to organisation learning in this paper I will show how contemporary organisational systems can be implicated in social defence systems. (Jaques 1955; Menzies-Lyth 1959). Once establishes a social defence system inhibits the relation worker from learning from experience. On the basis of my PhD study, I found that teachers learning from experience get blocked as a result of an interplay between the teacher's professional identity and anxiety provoking experiences related to the basic challenges in the teacher's work (i.e. relationships to the students), and the school's inability to "contain" (Bion 1962) these experiences.

3. THE CASE

Let's turn to data in my PhD study. It is based on one year of fieldwork in two different Norwegian junior high schools including extensive observations of teachers, individual interviews, and focus group interviews with a number of teachers in the two schools. My main informants were Kristin and Solveig, one on each school, both 26 years old and both newly graduated, in their first year of experience. Analysis of the data material was conducted in two stages, first a phenomenological analysis, close to the teachers' own accounts and reflections upon work, and second a psychoanalytic analysis.

The emotional experiences are pivotal to my dissertation. It wasn't just what the teachers themselves said about the emotional experiences that was important - it was also important to capture situations where the teachers avoided "seeing" the emotional side.

I wanted the teachers to tell me about things that were important to them, things they thought a lot about and preferably something that frustrated them. By telling about such concrete or specific incidents, the teacher provided his/her "self" interpretation.

Through detailed descriptions and by reliving the incidents, the teachers' emotions from the situations they told me about could be revived and expressed. It was my intention that the description of concrete situations would point in the direction of emotional experiences. They would also give me an opportunity to identify unconscious communication, such as projective identification. I tried to look for signs of this unconscious form of communication in the relationships the teachers told me about.

3.1 The emergence of a social defence system

And through my work with all the transcribed material, the outline emerges of a social defence system within the school system. it gradually emerged that the work of a teacher is of such a nature that it can lead to mental pain, and this might give rise to what Bion (1961) calls *basic assumptions*, which has much in common with Jaques' concept (1955) of *social defence systems*. Menzies Lyth used the term social defence system in her classical paper from 1959, referring to a hypothetical construction which described certain features of the (nursing) organisation as an existing social institution. What characterises the social defence system, as she describes it, is that it aims to help an individual to avoid the experience of anxiety, guilt, doubt or uncertainty. She made it clear, however, that she did not think the (nursing) organisation as an *institution* carried out this defence. Defence can only be carried out by individuals. Behaviour is however the connection between the

individuals' mental defence and the institution, she said.

"Social defence" occurs when a group of people unconsciously collude to protect themselves against anxiety and tension at their work place, often at the expense of carrying out their real task. In other words, the social defence system is all about how organisations can protect against mental pain. The psychoanalyst John Steiner (1985) describes a function which he calls *turning a blind eye*. The social defence system can be about turning a blind eye to difficult emotions, topics or relations. The result is an undermining of necessary activities and genuine emotions.

A social defence system, then, has its origin in anxiety, which one envisages as projected and given an independent existence in the social structure and culture of the organisation. The social defence system develops slowly and gradually becomes a part of the external reality (the school's structure and culture) which old and new teachers alike must adhere to.

One of the main findings in my dissertation was a presence of a social defence system in the schools which works against developing the teacher-student relation. I will give the reader a glimpse into the material that led me to the construction of this social defence system in the school.

My material seems to indicate that Kristin and Solveig both linked their self-image to what kind of relationships they had to their students. And they had high ambitions for how this relationship should be, ideally. On the basis of Kristin and Solveig's ideal I might conclude that they "define" good contact between teacher and student as a relationship of trust where both parties show that they care about the other; the student by sharing about himself or herself, and the teacher by showing care and concern. This kind of "good relationship" makes the teachers feel they are good teachers**.**

As I looked at the other teachers' statements and stories, I concluded that the pressure to have a good relationship to the students was so strong that a poor relationship could not be described, the poor relationship didn't exist, it became unmentionable. The only thing it was possible to put into words was the problem of not having a relationship, i.e. students whom the teacher was unable to establish contact with.

I asked Tora, a mature woman and an experienced teacher, as I asked all the teachers I interviewed, whether there were any emotions that one was not allowed to show in front of the students. Tora replied:

> *I must not show a student that I don't like him. I mean, it's not permitted not to like a student. You must work on the problem to try and see the positive sides of a student. I have a basic belief that everyone wants to be good, that we all want to make others happy. I don't think people really are out to destroy) Some students do a lot to ruin my teaching. But if I leave it at that, it's easy to dislike the students. I think students understand it when they are disliked, just as I understand it when someone dislikes me. The non-verbal language comes across so powerfully that you can't hide it .* (21.01.03),

If we look carefully at Tora's statement, a dilemma emerges: **She must not show something she can't hide.** She must not show a student that she doesn't like him, while at the same time she is quite unable to hide her dislike if it is there. What Tora said can also

be interpreted as if she is feeling that she must be "herself" when facing the students. She feels that she has no choice in this. She says: *Student and teacher will always see through each other.*

This wish or need to be oneself when facing the students became more and more evident throughout my material, among all the teachers. They wanted to be professional, but for some reason they also felt a great pressure to "be themselves", to be "genuine" in their relationship to the student. And that was in a way more in spite of than because of what they felt a professional teacher should be like.

Something else complicates this imperative to "be oneself" while also liking all students, and that is that the teachers I spoke to felt a great need to live up to an ideal, just as Solveig and Kristin expressed, to have a good relationship to the student in order to provide appropriate teaching for him/her and in order to be a good teacher.

3.2 The manifestations of the defence system

It seems that it is precisely the teachers' wish/need to "be themselves" when facing the students, that gives rise to the social defence system which blocks the teachers' learning from experience. As a kind of synthesis of my findings, I developed a model of the defence system in schools.
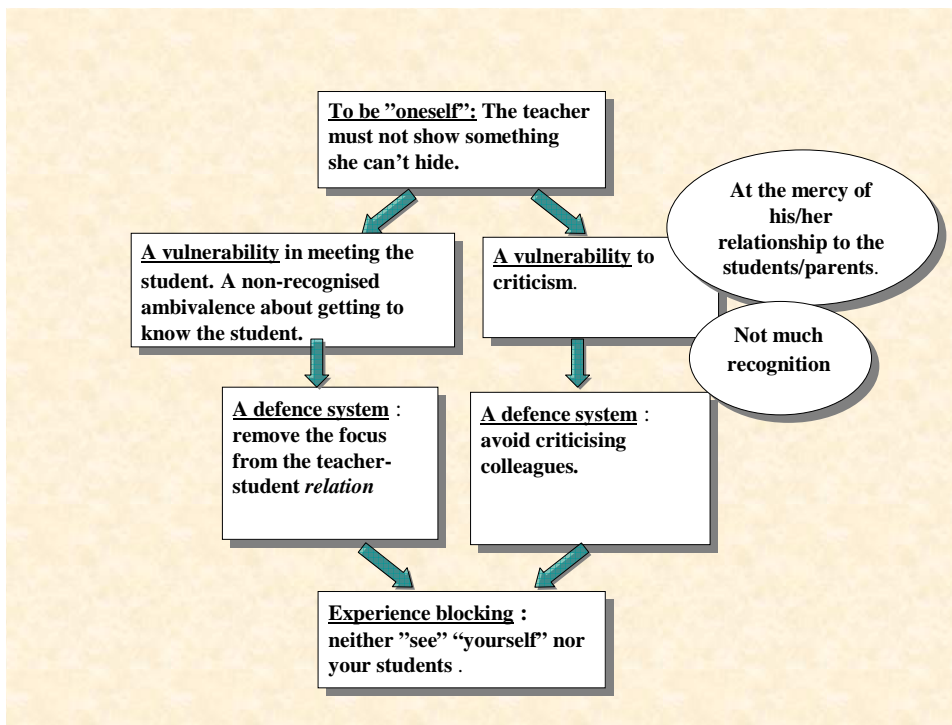
My starting point is the dilemma described as the teachers feeling they can do nothing but be themselves in their encounter with the student, while at the same time they have to like all the students. As I interpret it, this dilemma leads to vulnerability in meeting the student and results in a non-recognised ambivalence about getting to know the student, or in other words, an ambivalence about creating that good contact which teachers say is so important. The word *vulnerable* or *vulnerability* I understand as a deep-seated, obligatory part of being

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human. Vulnerability will arise when you feel dependent in your relationship with someone else. To be naked and vulnerable is to have no protection. The teacher is being driven towards this lack of protection in his/her relationship to the students.

Among colleagues, the wish or need to "be oneself" in the teacher role led to a vulnerability to criticism. The work of teaching is felt to be so personal that all criticism becomes personal criticism. The social defence system has been established in the school to protect each teacher from feeling that he or she is being criticised as a person.

The teacher's vulnerability to criticism was expressed in several ways. There was, for instance, an unwritten rule that teachers must not criticise each other's way of teaching. Kristin said this very clearly when I asked if there were any emotions she was permitted or not permitted to show, any unwritten rules. She thought about it and then replied, *:......if so, I suppose that must concern such professional things as ways of teaching, ways of doing things, - I don't interfere in your things, and you don't interfere in mine.(...) My things are for example my subject and the students I teach, the way I choose to teach them and how I organise the teaching. That's my business. We often have discussions about this and that, and then it's fine to say what you like, that's no problem, but then you are speaking more generally.*

Another way of showing vulnerability to criticism was expressed through not criticising each others' students. There was a tendency for the teachers to defend their own class. For, as one teacher said, *it's really ourselves we are defending.*

The vulnerability to criticism was further challenged by the teacher often feeling at the mercy of his/her relationship to the students or parents, and by a working environment with not much recognition**.**

The defence system that develops is aimed at protecting the teachers from the things they are vulnerable to. The purpose of the defence system is therefore to remove the focus from the teacher-student relation and to avoid criticising colleagues.

Let's take a look at some of the manifestations of the defence system in more detail. The "rule" that a teacher **must like all students** can paradoxically enough, be interpreted as an expression of the social defence system which is meant to move the focus away from the relationship. The "rule" can be understood as depersonalisation, categorisation and negation of the importance of individuals (even though it can seem like the exact opposite to start with). Individuals' responsibility is then reduced, and along with it the threat of the teachers identity (the threat of not being the person the teacher wants to be).

Social defence was also expressed by **avoiding talking about one's relationship with students**. This became visible both in the structure and the culture of the school. In the structure I could e.g. recognise that the teachers hadn't organised counselling sessions where they talked about their relationships with students (although they said they wanted counselling). In the school culture it became e.g. visible by the fact that teachers talked very little about their relationships with students, both in the staff room and at meetings they had where this could have been discussed. The groups of teachers discussed general pedagogical questions and were specific only where practical details were concerned.

I see the way **the teachers tried to control relationships unconsciously in order to be the teacher they wanted to be** as a part of the social defence system. As an example I can refer to
the fact that the teachers in many cases divided their job into a professional part and an interpersonal part by saying that the interpersonal part wasn't what they were *really* supposed to be doing. This can be interpreted as trying to control the relationship unconsciously so they could be who they wanted to be. My interpretation is that the greater the mental pressure, the more likely it is that a teacher will unconsciously make a divide (or split) between professional and personal to sustain their self image.

As a part of the defence system **the teachers tried, more or less consciously to "remove" students that were difficult to like or who made them break their ideal of whom they wanted to be**. Among other things they did this by pushing responsibility onto others, people higher up at the school or "specialists". This also points to anxiety of incompetence in interpersonal relationships.

Since the operative social defence system in schools is not criticising each other, teachers wanted **unity, equality and control.** What characterised good relationships between colleagues, they said, was the fact that they were (quote) "*similar as people*". For instance, that they had the same "*problems with students*" , the same "*way of handling conflicts*", the same "*way of thinking*" or they felt similar because they were in the same situation, for instance "*new at school*", "*the same age*", had "*the same sense of humour*", were "*interested in the same things*" and that sort of thing. Many teachers often called being similar "*getting on well together*". They felt, then, that this was important in order to be able to work well together. And even though this can be seen as being in contrast to the ideal of "being oneself", it is understandable in light of the defence system of avoiding the feeling of criticism.

As I mentioned earlier, teachers feel they are under a great deal of pressure and feel responsible for creating a good student-teacher relationship, - "***that's** what being a good teacher **is***". The social defence system acts as a counterweight to this individual, personal pressure. Through perceiving unity, equality and control they take away some of the feeling of carrying the responsibility alone and "guilt" in the case of not being able to do something. It becomes an expression of the ambivalence teachers have towards getting to "know" their students.

It became very important **having a nice time together.** Keeping things "safe" creates a buffer for this lonely insecurity, and can be understood as a part of the social defence system.

It was **difficult for the teachers to learn from each others' experiences**, although they talked a lot about having shared their experiences with colleagues. In reality this often didn't happen. Learning about the personal side of their work from each other was something they found difficult. In light of the defence system, this becomes logical. It is difficult to learn from each other when you have to be so aware that nothing should be perceived as criticism, and it is difficult to learn from each other when it comes to being "yourself". That's why learning from each other was easier when it came to planning classes, sharing stencils etc. - on that level, but as soon as there was talk of solving conflicts or other interpersonal work, things became difficult. Gunnar said: "*You can easily talk*

about the professional side of teaching, but big parts of our job, especially when it comes to relationships, then it's your very being. It's not that easy to talk to people about your whole being..." Others said they couldn't copy each other. Kristin said: *"of course, you want to be a good teacher.. um, but .. being a good teacher is reflected in being able to be yourself .. I think"*.

Within a social defence system it is difficult to learn from experience, and I have called this **experience blocking**. Experience blocking manifesting itself in verbal expressions such as wishing *"to start with a clean slate"* or in not wanting to know too much about the students while all the time giving them *"another chance"*, the school year cycle where one *"starts afresh"* every autumn, etc. Blocking of experiences becomes a consequence of teachers not being able to link incidents and experiences (*"attack on linking"*, Bion 1959), which makes *"seeing"* both oneself and students difficult. The social defence system has thus fulfilled its purpose.

4. SOCIAL DEFENCE SYSTEMS AND MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

In the psychoanalytic study of organizations there is a struggle to understand the inner life of organizations. So fare in this paper I have considered the source or the origin to the social defence system to be anxiety, vulnerability and threat to the "selves". If we on the other hand look at the visible signs of the social defence system, this is characteristics that could originate from a lot of other sources. In Norway as well as in every European country there have recently been restructured and reformatted in schools. There is some evidence that this transforms the learning environment for both teachers and students.

To illustrate: The challenge for young relation workers can be described in this way: Young relation workers come into the human service organisations wanting to help clients/students, through forming helping relationships. They can however be confronted with obstructions both from inside and outside. The hindrances from inside are due to the threat the professionals may feel for the Self in relation to the clients/students. The consequence can be, as described in my studies, that the professional unconsciously remove his/hers focus away from the relationships to the clients/students. From outside the relation worker can be confronted with a system witch imposes very procedural work, leaving them little time and space for the exercise of their clinical judgement and their empathic knowledge. The consequence in both cases is a dissonance between what the relation worker thought the work was going to be, and what the work place or themselves allowed them to do. The point is that the system fit like a glove. From the individual there is a (internal) need for protection from mental pain and from the society there is a (external) need for efficiency. The same (social defence)system serves both purposes. The problem is that such reality prohibits relation workers from performing their main tasks, forming helping relationships to the clients/students. And since the hindrances derive from forces both from inside and outside it is very difficult to apprehend and change such systems. And exactly because the hindrances both come from inside and outside they are very difficult to go around regardless of what the individual themselves express.

Despite many teachers see themselves as individualists they are at the same time a part of a defence system that is meant to protect against individuality and personalisation of one's work. The social defence system entails requirements regarding discipline, control and

subordination, in contrast to teachers' ideal of "themselves" as teachers. Most wanted involvement, creativity and mutual respect between teacher and student. This means individual teachers felt frustrated while protected in social defence. There is a "price" to pay for the social defence system.

Bain (1998) state that organizations with a similar primary task which together constitute a system domain[2] are likely to have similar social defenses against anxiety. I want to add that we will find the same defense at all organizations doing *relation work*.

Chernomas (2007) is critical to Mentzies Lyth's social defense system theory, and says that "*…rather than mitigating anxieties hospitals promote alienation and anxiety*" (ibid 372). He argues that the hospital has been organized in the interest of its owners and/or managers, not to defend nurses from psychotic anxieties. The result, he climbs, is an exacerbation of nurses` anxieties. Out of the nurses condition Chernomas think it is important to ask *which external social arrangements are more likely to exacerbate or mitigate these internal struggle* (2007:374).

He takes an interesting stand. But by asking this question I thing Chernomas underestimate that a defence system is not a deliberate way of acting. A social defence system is an unconscious result of an unconscious problem. It is not a good "solution" to the anxiety problem.

Many of the actions (or lacks of action) I found in my material should not be seen as evidence of incompetence, but rather of the teachers needing to distance themselves from intense emotions. The teachers and the school play down or turn a blind eye to experiences of feeling offended and vulnerable in their relationships. Teachers felt it urgent to avoid feelings of guilt and personal responsibility in relation to the students. My previous study of nurses in a hospital showed similar results meaning that nurses developed strategies to keep strong emotions at a distance (Ramvi 1996). Margareth Rustin (2005) also emphasizes professionals' need to avoid guilt. The best way of achieving this is to stop thinking and avoid giving meaning to these experiences, she says. Rustin (2005:12) expresses this clearly by stating that "*Thinking involves the attribution of meaning to our experience. Without a sense of meaning, it is difficult to imagine what personal responsibility for actions would amount to*".
The social defence system helps to keep the emotional at a distance. According to Bion it will also prevent thinking - and that makes it a very serious matter.

In my point of view the splitting of the nurse-patient relationship and the Tayloristic way of making routines and tasks fragmentation (Chernomas argues that Taylorist approaches characterize the hospital) is exactly how two systems fit together. The nurses need a system that can defend them from anxiety and identity threats. The management needs a system that can fulfil the capitalistic idea. Making routines, tasks fragmentation and so on are the activities that meats both needs.

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[2] Bain (1998) presents the concept *system domain defenses*. He describes this located between the concept of social defenses at the level of local institution, as evidenced by Menzies Lyth, and the concept of "*domain defenses*" identified by Gilmore and Krantz (1990). Most organizations are part of a system domain, and it comprises all organizations with a similar primary task, he says, and the social defenses within these organizations are an expression of system domain defenses

Chernomas climbs that if different forms of work organization were to permit closer relationships between the patient and the nurse, it might be possible to reduce the anxiety. My study of student nurses showed something else. For the student nurses many conditions for making relationships to the patients existed, but they didn't use the opportunities. To risk entering the relation the relation worker need something more than the possibility to do so. He/she will need an active and pushing and containing environment. My hypothesis is that when structures are given to containment the anxiety will slowly vanish. The social defence system witch gives the relation worker protection from the vulnerable relation to the client/student is however not **containing** the relation workers anxiety in the manner of giving him/her a possibility to learn from experience. A social defence system is rigid and gives no rise to development of the relational work. My hypothesis is that the social defense system relief the relation worker from the burden of threat to the Selves derived from the relation work. This is not a containing system, but in fact the opposite.

5. CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

In the hospital described by Menzies Lyth there was no organizational learning, *indeed, rather the opposite* (Bain 1998:415). But what is organizational learning? It is at least not the summation of individual learning within an organization, and even if individual learning is a constituent of organizational learning, the two are distinct concepts. To be short I will refer to Bion and his theory about learning, and his concept of container-contained. This concept provides a bridging link between individual learning and organizational learning. Bain define organizational learning as occurring when there is co-evolution of "*organizational container*" and "*contained*". In contrast to the experience block I defined in my study of teachers the school needs to develop a container for organization experiences.

My hypothesis is that the power of the social defense system is the function of internal and external forces. This is a system that is difficult to apprehend. If changes are implemented to support needs from the internal force, counter-attack comes to surface from the external force e.g. if counseling is required to help the teachers to talk about their relationships to the students, the teachers could experience this as threatening and undermine the counseling by e.g. being to busy to attend.

Chernomas (2007:379) says that *professional organizations cannot be reduced to a method of defending anxiety, but must be understood as a demand for a sharing of control and the need to confront collectively an institution not set up to protect their psyche but to repress and manipulate it.*

Bion claims that *defence* is all about denying that one's problems are of a psychological origin. It is only when one has admitted that some of the problems do have this origin, that one can begin to solve the problems, he says.

It is my hypothesis that the social defense system has to be replaced by an evolution of organizational container and contained to enhance professional practice in relational work.

Further thinking is required concerning the use of the concept system domains and their relevance in the formation of social defenses in relation work. Likewise I have to elaborate

my thoughts about the fusion between social defense systems and management systems.

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