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## Human Capital from Psychoanalytic Perspective

### 1. Introduction

The article below is of theoretical nature. Its overarching goal is to present an application of psychoanalytic theories to the sciences of organisation and management. The specific objective is an attempt at psychoanalytic interpretation of the phenomena and processes that comprise the so-called human capital of an organisation. The application of concepts that are derived from psychoanalysis to organisations lets us not only better understand the mechanisms of functioning of the individuals forming an organisation, but, most of all, provides knowledge indispensable for more efficient management of organisations, both of the *profit* and *non-profit* type. The psychoanalytic perspective provides a deeper interpretation of the motives for acting of the individuals, as it reaches beyond the people's declarations (Barabasz 2008).

This article presents an attempt at identification of the psychological mechanisms which influence the shape of the complex social object described as an organisation's 'human capital.' Members of an organisation determine its successes or failures, challenges taken up and defeats suffered; they also determine its value; they define the climate and culture of the organisation, the ways of

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coping with serious crises and everyday difficulties; they shape the process of everyday communication and the way of finding an understanding in emergencies. Creating the relational capital of the organisation, people attribute to it intangible and priceless value. It is not without grounds that the definitions of the concept of 'human capital' emphasise the importance of trust and loyalty towards the organisation. In this article, the concept of human capital is confronted with one of the key characteristics of organisations, that is the hierarchy of organisational structure. The concept is discussed on the basis of its psychoanalytic interpretation.

## **2. Human capital in organisation as added value**

Learning about an organisation requires focusing on its main actors, that is organisation members, in particular the management. It seems, however, that what is one of the most fascinating features of an organisation as a social entity is the fact that it escapes full cognition, remaining, in a way, an unfathomed entity. It is a challenge for both theoreticians and practitioners of management to try to grasp what an organisation is by means of more general categories that describe its features, nature, and at the same time the uniqueness of that living social entity. One of such categories, which has become the basis for formulation of guidelines for organisational management, is the concept of human capital.

The theory of human capital was developed in the 1970's by G. Becker (1993), based on the fundamental assumption that people are the most precious resource of an enterprise (organisation). Then, the main characteristics of human capital are competitiveness and exclusiveness. The human capital model implemented in the practice of management is based on the belief that human is a being that is capable, willing to learn and striving for self-fulfilment by self-development. This approach leads, among other things, to paying attention to employee's psychological competencies. Thus, what an important asset during recruitment are the personality characteristics of a job candidate. There are usually teamwork skills, willingness to develop, loyalty, as well as other characteristics, specific for the needs of a given organisation.

According to L. Edvinsson (2001, p. 34) the term human capital comprises "...all skills, knowledge and experience of employees and managers of an enterprise... Human capital must also incorporate the creativity and innovativeness of the organisation."

Then, B. Mikula (2006, p. 96) defines human capital as all resources, "which are carried by people, such as knowledge (explicit and implicit, declarative and

procedural), abilities, values, norms, attitudes, believes, emotional intelligence, etc. Human capital forms configurations of those resources, which are directed at the other resources of the organisation, they activate the organisation to create value. Its value depends on mutual adjustment and the structure of links between all resources.”

Next, A. Szalkowski (2006, p. 19) writes that, with reference to the individual, capital is composed of abilities, health, knowledge, motivations and vital energy, as well as time. Human capital is a specific resource embodied in people and may be either increased or decreased...”. The author draws attention to the long tradition of the category of human capital, indicating that the concept of human capital derives from the works of Adam Smith, and it was developed into the human capital theory in the works of G. Becker and T.W. Schultz.

In some further definitions, M. Przybyła (2007, p. 91) emphasises that “human capital is the abilities and entrepreneurship of employees, their interpersonal skills, competencies, knowledge, experience, involvement, emotional intelligence, morale, mutual trust and motivation.”

There is no doubt that all the above definitions refer to psychological qualities, desired from organisation members. Despite numerous, similarly phrased definitions, the term ‘human capital’ remains multi-dimensional and happens to be understood in various ways. The differences are not surprising when we consider the fact that the term ‘human capital’ comprises two complex, ambiguous concepts, and its intuitive understanding draws attention towards the psycho-sociological aspects of organisation’s functioning. At the same time, in the sciences of organisation and management, a different term, cognate and close to human capital, is used, that is the concept of social capital. That term from the border of economics and sociology means the capital (as an element of the process of production and life in an organised society), the value of which is based on mutual social relations and trust of individuals, which can therefore achieve better benefits (from the economic and social points of view). The term ‘social capital’ was introduced into sociological literature also in the 1970’s by P. Bourdieu, and was popularised by J. Coleman [1988]. J. Coleman’s approach has been taken over by R. Putnam, according to whom social capital means the totality of norms, networks of mutual trust, loyalty, interdependencies in a given social group (Putnam, Leonardi, Nanetti 1995, p. 258). This article employs the concept of ‘human capital’ as closer to psychology, while the term ‘social capital’ seems to be closer to the sociological approach, although both terms concern the same phenomena to a high degree.

### **3. Organisation in the light of processes and mechanisms operating under the surface of consciousness**

Psychologists who represent not only the psychoanalytic or psychodynamic approaches, point out that the perception and ideas concerning the social reality, including organisations, are not neutral (Vansina-Cobbaert 2008, pp. 20-27). They remain under the influence of current emotions, as well as prior life experiences, which shape the personality of every individual. Looking at the actions of an organisation only from the perspective of rational knowledge, neglecting the emotional aspects and others which escape direct cognition or are hidden under the surface of observable behaviours, does not guarantee full comprehension, thus adequate interpretation of what is happening in an organisation (cf.: Stapley 2013, pp. 19-20). Failing to understand the internal processes that occur under the surface of consciousness, it is difficult to comprehend the mechanisms that govern the functioning of a group and organisation. The psychoanalytic theory seems, therefore, to be the most adequate tool for learning about and examining the complex intra-organisational processes. It has been used in the sciences of organisations and society for at least 50 years, although, in the Polish context, it is mostly applied in the area of psychotherapeutic interactions targeted at individuals. The use of psychoanalysis in the context of organisations is, however, slowly developing in Poland. Its application to organisation definitely exceeds examination of pathologies or dysfunctions. Psychoanalysis provides, most of all, the concepts that facilitate understanding of the functioning of an organisation, also with regard to the category as general, and at the same time as complex as human capital of an organisation. It is possible because the psychoanalytic conceptual apparatus enables interpretation of the motives of actions carried out by members of groups and organisations, both at the level of individual behaviours, and behaviours observed in the context of the organisation viewed holistically.

The central concept in the psychoanalytic theory is the unconscious, despite many changes that it has undergone over the decades. Of course, Z. Freud did not 'invent' the unconscious, but found a place for it within two models, a topographic one and a structural one, which describe the functioning of the human psyche. Z. Freud (1999) treated the unconscious as an aspect of human psyche which can be examined and he proposed a system of analytic interpretations and constructs for assessment and examination of the unconscious. According to the originator of psychoanalysis, unconsciousness is a state which is made up by the thoughts and desires which have been repressed, that is forced out of consciousness. What

has been repressed, therefore, is the prototype of the unconscious (Laplanche, Pontalis 1996).

Unconscious thoughts and desires do not operate in the same way as the conscious processes. Introspection does not, however, yield access to them; they cannot be changed by way of logical arguments or material evidence, supplied in an intellectual discussion. Above all, unconscious thoughts and desires are not subject to free discussion, as the immense powers of the psyche keep them in the state of repression. People expends plenty of energy while defending against disturbing, inconvenient desires or thoughts, trying to confine them in the area of the unconscious (cf.: Freud 1997; Gabriel 2004; Stapley 2013).

Beside unconsciousness, what is another concept that is extremely important for understanding the relations in organisations is the phenomenon of transference. Psychoanalysis, initially focused on understanding of the behaviour of individuals, has become, as time passed, it has also become occupied with the relations in groups and organisations. Z. Freud and S. Ferenczi, and later their successors, sought to explain processes which lead to the formation of a group, as well as described the way of functioning of group members, whether and how participation in the life of the group affects individual behaviours of its members. S. Ferenczi (1952) argued that transference, as a phenomenon key for the psychoanalytic theory, develops in the everyday life of individuals, who constantly redirect their repressed feelings onto others. He developed a theory which combines two important phenomena, that is transference and projection. He has indicated that identification through projection (externalisation) and through introjection (internalisation) are of fundamental importance for the functioning of groups, especially when we want to deal with the superior-subordinate relations. Z. Freud (1975) thought that the forces that bind a group together stem from the emotional relationships between its members, and every individual builds a positive tie with his or her leader, and a similar tie is formed with the other group members. One of the mechanisms included in the libidinal processes is the identification mechanism, that is the process which makes a person want to be the same as someone else, important for that person. Identification is considered by psychoanalysis to be the most important form of emotional tie with a different person. In the process of identification, the person who wants to be like someone else, makes an introjection of that person into his or her own Ego. Z. Freud (quoted in: de Board 2003, p. 15) claims that "the basic group is a collection of individuals who substituted their ideal ego with one and the same object and, as a consequence, they identify themselves with one another in their ego". The process then is responsible for creation of group ties

between the leader and the other group members and between specific people making up that group, team or organisation.

Another phenomenon which we understand thanks to psychoanalysis, important for interpretation of the actions of organisation members, are defence mechanisms understood as unconscious ways of coping with difficult and undesirable emotional states, mainly coping with anxiety. Explanation of the functioning of groups, organisations, and institutions in terms of anxiety and defence against it has been initiated in 1950's, when E. Jaques (1951) stated that the social system supports the individual in his or her psychological defences against anxiety. The significance of the social system of defences is similarly described by I. Menzies-Lyth (1988), according to whom individual defence mechanisms are inscribed into the system of social defences. The task of the system is to avoid anxieties and internal conflicts by organisation members, especially those that concern the basic tasks implemented in the organisation. Individuals shape and support those elements of the social system, which support the most rigid and primordial individual defence mechanisms. I. Menzies-Lyth (1988) calls the forms of defences that develop in an organisation "defence techniques." Subordination to the defences in conditions of joint work facilitates identification of individuals with the team, group, and organisation. At the same time, each organisation member unconsciously supports those defence mechanisms, which he or she applies him or herself. As a result, there form harmonised defence mechanisms within the group and organizations. Defence mechanisms typical for specific individuals (group members) are reflexively supported and reinforced. The participation of specific people in the construction of the social structure of the organisation gains, therefore, the nature of mutual exchange. The concept of human capital, from the psychoanalytic viewpoint, refers to precisely those processes and mechanisms. They are described through references to a deeper, unconscious level of functioning of groups and organisations.

#### **4. Human capital in the aspect of organisational hierarchy**

The issue of human capital in the psychoanalytic perspective invites the reference to one of the attributes of the organisational structure, which seems to be particularly vital for the issue at hand. It is the organisational hierarchy, an attribute typical for all populations, not only those composed of people, but characterising all communities. Psychoanalytic interpretation of the meaning of hierarchical relations for human capital of an organisation refers to the commonness of hierarchical relations in the world of living creatures. For

already the order of birth determines manifestation of privileges and obligations, which, sometimes explicitly, and sometimes implicitly influence the structure of personalities of children in the family (Freud 1999; Gabriel 2004, p. 85).

Pursuant to the definition provided by *Słownik Języka Polskiego (Dictionary of the Polish Language)*(1996) hierarchy means an established order according to a specific criterion, such as importance, or a group of people holding power, especially in Churches. As regards management sciences, hierarchy is defined as one of the dimensions of the organisational structure, beside centralisation and formalisation (Weber 1990, pp. 344-350). Hierarchy is understood as a configuration of various levels in the organisation structure, at the top of which there is the chief officer or a group of officers, responsible for the operations of the organisation as a whole. What is a vital element in the process of establishing the hierarchical structure is establishment of such links which will not only define who reports to whom in an organisation. Such ties are an element of a broader concept, that is the organisational ties. The ties are relations of interdependence existing between elements of a given structure, which serve the purpose of implementation of the goals of the whole system. The nature of organisational ties consists in the superior's power to assign tasks to subordinates (Stoner, Freeman, Gilbert 1997, pp. 309-311).

Pursuant to the definition, organisational hierarchy refers to authority and responsibility of the people occupying higher positions in the organisational structure. Within it, the superiors are vested with some rights, usually the right to give orders, to reward and punish. At the same time, they are responsible for both their own actions and the actions of their subordinates. On the other hand, subordinates are obliged to act in accordance with the instructions of their superiors, submit to the system of principles and regulations, developed and binding in the organisation. It is key that, from the perspective of the organisational hierarchy, the authority and responsibility are not assigned *a priori* to an individual, they are attributed to a specific place in the intra-organisational structure.

Y. Gabriel (2004, pp. 85-87) writing on the organisational hierarchy, emphasises that it is based on authority; he refers to the way, in which individuals cope with the authority of their superiors, how they experience themselves in contact with people with authority, how they solve conflicts with people with authority resulting from the place occupied in the hierarchy of power. According to the psychoanalytic theory, the aforementioned aspects of the relation subordinate-superior reach to the child-father relation (the internal conflict phase, manifested in the form described as the Oedipus complex), as well as they refer to the

conflict with the instance called Superego (in the structural model of the psyche). For it is owing to the development of the Superego that we are able to submit, be subordinated to people with authority, be employees capable of respecting superiors and all other people who embody a similar kind of authority to the one we used to bestow on the father.

In accordance with the psychoanalytic theory, a person perceived as a leader has the power to reinforce self-acceptance and building self-confidence among organisation members (Freud 1975). On the one hand, loyalty and submission of a subordinate ensures protection and gives a sense of safety to the subordinates; it makes the relation bilateral and mutual. At the same time, however, the organisation's hierarchical nature means for the employees (organisation members) the requirement of obedience and submission to the people who are appointed 'officers,' playing the roles of people with authority, often only due to the place occupied in the organisational structure. Besides, it is known, that those people are just as susceptible to trauma, the experience stress and suffer defeats, in addition, they are subordinated to their superiors too. Y. Gabriel (2004, p. 86), writing about the relations based on hierarchical dependence emphasised that the power of the superior to protect subordinates corresponds to his or her ability to maintain his or her position in the organisational structure. Some leaders shape the loyalty of their reports by strengthening their formal authority by their personal authority. Unfortunately, it does not pertain to all people occupying managerial positions in companies. It can happen that the superior has neither personal competences, nor even professional ones; this makes it more impossible or at least difficult for them to reinforce loyalty and involve subordinates (Levinson 1991; Barabasz 2012).

In the process of exercising power, individuals who do that as a result of the position occupied in the hierarchical structure of the organisation may experience various kinds of limitations. Usually, they are consequences of the fact that they are responsible for situations, over which they have no control; they experience their limitations also when the reality confronts them with unforeseeable situations. What is another source of discomfort, or even a strong stress causing factor, is the feeling of being assessed by the superior, who does not have sufficient or any knowledge whatsoever about the work performed by the subordinate. The unfavourable mental distance between the superior and the subordinate develops whenever the superiors do not provide the subordinates with support and protection in the scope and of the sort that the subordinates need. The distance is extremely easy to transform into lack of trust and fear



of the superiors. As a result, this may lead to intensification of the process of attacking authority by the subordinates.

Rivalry between organisation members who compete for promotion, especially if the promotion principles and criteria are unclear and ambiguous, is another aspect of hierarchy, important in the context of human capital. According to Y. Gabriel (2004, p. 87), promotion is a tool of building the feeling of self-esteem, especially desired and appreciated by members of an organisation with narcissistic personality structure. As regards the attitude of cynical distance, demonstrative the feeling of superiority and idealising the organisational past are typical forms of coping with wounded vanity applied by people with narcissistic personality structure. These attitudes occur both among subordinates and superiors. Such people suffer when they do not occupy positions that they find satisfactory, and those should usually be positions appropriately high in the organisational hierarchy. These are some of the reasons why promotion prospects are a strong and effective motivating factor. In an attempt to fully utilise the motivating power of organisational hierarchy, organisations keep looking for new possibilities of luring employees with status markers. Thanks to those status markers and symbols, they build their employees' conviction that they participate in a process of constant development and ongoing change. This leads to strengthening and solidifying of the incessant race for higher salaries, titles, positions, perks, status symbols, which in turn again incite in the organisation members the feelings of jealousy or envy, as well as upset those who failed to fulfil their professional aspirations, obtain specific markers testifying to the occupied attractive position in the organisational hierarchy.

Hierarchy does not only cause negative psychological consequences for organisation members. It also offers some benefits, which are psychologically significant for many members of organisations. Firstly, appropriately high place in the hierarchy gives, in the long-term perspective, a feeling of development, growth and progress. That feeling, even if it turns out to be illusory, strengthens the organisational ties and have the power of motivating organisation members for making an effort and taking up challenges, at least for some time. The conviction of participation in actions aimed at progress, especially with fair, mature form of competition, may be a strong motivational factor, especially for young employees; it may encourage them to put in a great deal of effort in order to achieve ambitious professional goals. Such employees, especially those with high aspirations, are likely to show a lot of involvement, even total dedication to the organisation and implementation of their own personal desires. Secondly, the hierarchical configuration of an organisation facilitates quick satisfaction of

the employees' need for power; even if they do not have the right competences, they have a clearly laid path and specific conditions that they should meet if they want to find legitimation of their need to dominate. It eliminates the need of verification of actual competencies, costly for the whole organisation, as specific organisation members get involved on their own imitative in the intense struggle for maintaining once occupied position. Therefore, despite the inconveniences described above, the hierarchical nature of an organisation means legitimation of the existing power structure. It also means support and encouragement to exercise power granted by the position in the organisational structure. At the same time, it happens that it creates opportunities for the most talented individuals of really quick progression, without the need to wait for leaving of someone higher up in the hierarchy and without the necessity of elimination of competitors, who strive for the same position, in a way that would be aggressive and destructive for the whole organisation. Thirdly, the hierarchical nature of an organisation may protect the organisation members against pressures coming from other sources than those that result directly from the reporting structure. It reduces the possibility of the occurrence of conflicts of loyalty, which usually concern employees subordinated to several superiors, as it happens in the matrix organisation. Finally, the last important, psychologically positive consequences of the hierarchy is the reduction of anxiety in organisation members (Gabriel 2004, p. 89). The effect is achieved thanks to the existence of clear reporting and subordination principles, as well as the use of career paths in accordance with the adopted principles.

## 5. Conclusions

Direct influence of superiors on the actions of organisation members subordinated to them is the essence of organisational hierarchy. Each superior (manager, head, leader) has formal entitlements, which result from his or her position in the organisational structure. The entitlements are of no great significance if they are not used properly or fully. Their effective use requires their acceptance by subordinates at every step of the organisational ladder. Meeting this condition results in the fact that the relations between members of hierarchically ordered organisation become really (rather than just declaratively) bilateral and mutual, based on loyalty, involvement and responsibility, adequate for the position occupied by each organisation member. Only then will the concept of 'human capital of an organisation' gain appropriate meaning and fill with the substance consistent with its definition. It stops being an abstract

determination, very difficult to define in a satisfactory way, and even more difficult to operationalise in the everyday functioning of an organisation.

The interpretation of human capital in the context of organisational hierarchy presented in the article is based on the findings of psychoanalytic theories. The approach assumes that, trying to understand an organisation, one should reach beyond the rational level and to contents repressed, that is unconscious motives, feelings, desires, fantasies and imaginations. The contents, included in the mind of every organisation member, form his or her internal world, which determines the behaviour in the external world. Knowledge of the dynamics of group processes, not only at the level of interpretation of behavioural acts, but also deep underlying mechanisms, seems useful not only for a narrow circles of group analysts and experts, but also practising managers. It enables drawing conclusions on the behaviours of specific organisation members, both at the level of behaviour of individuals, groups, and also the whole organisation. It sheds new light on the relations between members of an organisation, at the same level of its structure, but, most of all, it permits a much better look at the relations based on dependence. For those relations are the essence of the hierarchical order of each organisation. Therefore, as long as there are hierarchical organisations, the knowledge and conceptual framework enabling description of complex relations between superiors and subordinates are needed. Some of those issues have been identified in this paper.

## Abstract

### **Human Capital from Psychoanalytic Perspective**

The article is of theoretical nature. Its aim is to present the psychoanalytic understanding of the capital which is constituted by organisation members. It is them who decides about the effects of the operations of an organisation, both its successes and failures. This article attempts at describing the psychological mechanisms which determine the complex phenomenon called 'human capital' of an organisation. The concept of 'human capital' has been confronted with one of the key attributes of an organisation, that is the hierarchy of the organisation's structure. The article presents a psychoanalytic interpretation of organisational hierarchy in the aspect of human capital, taking into account the positive and negative consequences for all organisation members.

**Keywords:** *human capital, psychoanalysis, hierarchy.*

## Streszczenie

### Kapitał ludzki w ujęciu psychoanalitycznym

Artykuł ma charakter teoretyczny. Jego celem jest przedstawienie psychoanalitycznego rozumienia kapitału, jakim są członkowie organizacji. To oni decydują o efektach działania organizacji, zarówno o jej sukcesach, jak i porażkach. W niniejszym artykule podjęta została próba opisanego mechanizmów psychologicznych, które determinują złożone zjawisko określane mianem „kapitału ludzkiego” organizacji. Pojęcie „kapitał ludzki” zostało skonfrontowane z jedną z kluczowych właściwości organizacji, jaką jest hierarchia struktury organizacyjnej. Artykuł przedstawia psychoanalityczną interpretację organizacyjnej hierarchii w aspekcie kapitału ludzkiego, uwzględniając jej pozytywne oraz negatywne konsekwencje dla wszystkich członków organizacji.

### Słowa

**kluczowe:** kapitał ludzki, psychoanaliza, hierarchia

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