CHAPTER 1

Original, Primary Mental Processes

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The 'dynamic unconscious as a system' (the Ucs.) develops out of our original, primary mental processes. Quite a lot of people still seem to think that this system is but a sort of garbage can for our mental life. They think of it as the collection of all their ugly, unacceptable infantile sexual or aggressive desires, which – because of the anxiety they generated – were pushed out of consciousness. And of course, such elements can be part of that 'dynamic unconscious'. Moreover, this is not a totally unimportant part, because it can form the basis for some of our psychic problems; but that part is not involved when we talk about the relevance of psychoanalytic thinking for the understanding of groups and organisations. I would even say that it is a part that should never be touched in the context of work with groups (with the exception of psychoanalytic therapy groups) and organisations.

Primary mental processes are partly present from the time before we are born. They slowly develop until we are around seven years old, after which they give the impression of fading away in favour of a very different kind of mental functioning called 'secondary process thinking' or, in common language: logic, scientific thinking. It takes at least until the end of puberty to firmly establish this second form of mental functioning – but our original 'primary process' way of thinking does not really disappear, it is only sort of

pushed behind its highly valued counterpart. From then on it becomes less directly visible. Yet, it stays active, continues to develop and to influence our way of being and operating.

Most interesting, however, is the fact that the hidden, basic mental processes not only have an impact on individual, but just as well on group and organisational life. In a certain way and to a certain extent, one could say that apart from individuals, groups and organisations also have a dynamic unconscious that penetrates their preferences, choices and ways of operating. We do not really know how this dynamic unconscious world of groups and organisations comes into being, nor do we know how it develops over time. The only possibility we have is to 'see it at work'; meaning that some observable group and organisational phenomena become understandable if we suppose the existence of such an unconscious inner world, and are able to reveal its impact in a given situation, which then becomes changeable. It is this feature that makes understanding primary process thinking so interesting in the context of consulting for groups and organisations.

The simplest way to look at our basic form of mental functioning is to define it as 'non-logic thinking'. It includes perceiving, experiencing, meaning attribution or sense making, motivation and communication. It is a form of thinking that starts well before we acquire verbal language. Consequently, at first, images dominate over words. We have reason to believe that this form of thinking is based on an association of images, and that, originally, it becomes visible only in behavioural reactions.¹ When words become part of the picture, they may at first be used in their literal or 'pictorial' sense, exactly as in dreams.²

¹ Those who are interested in the origins of this form of 'thinking' as it becomes visible during pregnancy, I would refer to the magnificent book by Piontelli (1992).

² It is interesting to see how other fields of study, like for instance philosophy and religion, talk about similar phenomena – be it only in adults – using opposite terms. Referring to adult forms of primary process thinking, they use the term 'secondary language'. On the other hand, what we would call 'secondary process thinking', they refer to as 'primary language'. Whenever this 'primary language' (for us meaning 'secondary process thinking') is equated with 'conceptual thinking' it comes a bit closer to psychoanalytic theory, but it is still not really the same. Moreover, primary and secondary processes are ways of 'thinking'. Basically they represent different ways of giving meaning to experiences; only later on do they give rise to different types of language. This will be explored further in the following chapters.

ILLUSTRATIONS

When I illustrate how the Ucs. functions, I often start with stories about young children because that is where it all begins and where it is relatively easy to see what I am talking about. This way it also becomes possible for me to show how these primitive ways of ‘thinking’ develop. Only further on will I introduce some vignettes from group or organisational contexts. How to use this way of looking when working with complex organisational problems is illustrated in Parts Two and Three.

Let me start with some observations about a pre-verbal child. Imagine a nice and warm early summer afternoon at a poolside. I walk on the lawn with my granddaughter, who is barely one year old, when her parents and their friends decide to go in for a swim. As the adults are sure that the water-loving girl will be eager to join in, I pull a bit further away from the pool, and talk to her about “mummy and daddy going in for a swim”, something that she has not seen before. She looks interested at the grown-ups as they appear in bathing suits. She points at them, and babbles away laughingly until everyone has entered the water. At that moment she grabs one of my legs and slightly shaking she starts whining. A bit lost at her unexpected reaction, I pick her up, try to comfort her, talking softly, inquiring, and stroking her back. But she holds on to me, hiding her face in my neck. As she slightly relaxes her grip, and acts as if willing to take a peak, I take a step closer to the pool. Instantly she grabs me even tighter and continues to hide her face in my neck. I pull back again, and sit myself down on the grass while holding her in my lap. As I sit there, looking at the swimmers, still trying to calm her down by slow, somewhat enthusiastic talk about mummy, daddy, and the others, enjoying themselves in the water, I begin to realise that all I see in that pool is a group of laughing, talking heads. I start wondering: when my granddaughter stands on the grass, her head is at about the same height as mine when sitting; could it be that, when she saw those ‘heads floating on the water’, she ‘thought’ that the people had lost their bodies? In order to check my supposition, I call my daughter, and ask her to step out. Hesitantly, visibly unclear about my reasons, she does so. With explicit pleasure I tell the little girl: “Look, mummy is back!” While holding onto me, she ventures to look up, and immediately, without a moment’s hesitation and with a joyful cry, she runs to her mother who picks her up, sharing in the pleasure. As soon as I reach them, my daughter, still uncertain about what has happened, returns to the pool, while her daughter and I sit down at the edge. From our new seats it is possible for the girl to see the whole bodies floating and moving around. She laughs, claps her hands,

and starts a 'song', moving her body to the rhythmic sounds she produces. For the rest of the afternoon the pleasure abounds!

Was I right to suppose that my granddaughter reacted with intense anxiety because, in her 'view', once you are in a swimming pool, your head detaches from your body, and your body just disappears? I can't know for sure. It is no more than my understanding of the total situation we were in together.

It happens, especially if an incident occurred repeatedly, that children remember their anxiety, and what it was all about. I had an acquaintance who remembered very well how, as a young child, she would get wild with anxiety whenever she had a stuffed nose. She could not tell her mother why, because she lacked the necessary verbal capacity. Regularly, the mother got fed up with her daughter's anxious insistence on getting help with blowing, and even cleaning out her nose. The situation became a source of constant, and to some extent hopeless struggle between mother and child, until, at a later age, the little girl was able to explain. In connection with the knowledge that worms can eat away on wood until it crumbles, she had imagined that, if the 'worms'³ were not taken out of her nose in time, they would eat the insides of her head, and it would come apart.

Once children possess sufficient verbal capacity, most of them tell us about their ways of looking at the world. Mothers, and especially kindergarten teachers, are able to produce many examples of the sort. From such examples it becomes clear that this primary form of thinking results, at least partly, from the way a child 'explains' its observations or experiences to itself. It is also based on the fact that to a child everything that moves or looks even a bit like a human or an animal is thought to be alive, holding thoughts and intentions.

When my daughter was somewhere around four she received a pair of orange-red pyjamas with little hearts on the front-top, as a Christmas present. She became wildly enthusiastic about it, and thought that she should be allowed to wear it just as well to kindergarten as to bed. During that same period I was trying to teach her that, when undressing at night, it is much more efficient if you put your clothes nicely in a little heap on a bedroom chair, than when you drop them along the way between the living room and your bedroom. She agreed that this sounded like a wise idea, but added that she might forget about it anyhow. A couple of months later, we went for a walk. Part of the way

³ In Dutch the childish word for hardened nasal mucus is 'worms'.

followed a ridge from where we had a panoramic view over the valley and the sky above. It was one of those beautiful early spring days during which the sun goes down rather early, and becomes a well-lined orange-red sphere in a plain greyish-blue sky. As my daughter looks over the valley, and notices the sun, she says with a combination of conviction and excitement: “Look mummy, the sun already put on its pyjamas!” and then, with a pensive nod of the head, and talking more to herself than to me, she adds: “It must have put its beams on a chair . . .”.

From the time children have mastered an understandable level of verbal expression, and until they are in primary school, one can hear them explain experiences in ways that adults would seldom think of. A kindergarten teacher told me once about a little girl in her care that, for the first time, saw a little boy take a pee. After visible amazement, the girl became very enthusiastic and asked the little guy: “Did your mummy sew this on to you?” The boy looked a bit puzzled, but could not provide an answer. Maybe he never wondered who ‘put together’ his body, or he never associated mothers with sewing, or whatever.

Once, one of our own boys came home from kindergarten and told me proudly that there was a new girl in his class, and that now she was his best friend, and did I know her name? Of course I did not, I told him. Her name was Wettilly, he said, and in a sort of reassuring voice, mixed with a touch of amazement he added: “But she is not wet you know”. It took me a few seconds before I grasped what he was saying. I laughed, gave him a kiss, and confirmed with pleasure how good it can feel to find a new friend, and that for sure she was not wet.

Apparently, if we call this form of basic mental functioning ‘unconscious’, it does not mean that we never experience(d) it, or never knew about it. It only points to the fact that it is part of a thought system that, originally – in babies and pre-verbal children – functions in a way that we can hardly imagine. Then, as verbal expression increases, it develops into something that we know about and understand. Yet – except in art and in some types of humour – it does not become integrated into our adult, secondary, conscious, and so-called ‘rational’ thought processes. Superficially it looks as if it disappears completely. In fact, as I already indicated, it continues to be active and to develop all through our adult life.

In as far as we refer to these primary thought processes as ‘phantasy’, the ph is intended to differentiate it explicitly from fantasy. At times, phantasy may be

the unrecognised source of an ongoing fantasy. The development of the fantasy itself, however, is at all times fully conscious, and a completely different thought process. We choose to start it, and can interrupt it willingly although not always easily. In addition, fantasy fulfils a specific developmental and/or protective function. Phantasies just happen to us, exactly like dreams. That is the reason why they may be referred to as 'dream-thoughts'. Like dreams they use homonyms interchangeably, or they use surprising combinations of images and words. As dreams often do, phantasies also function as a kind of trial to understand, to explain, and to give meaning.

STEPWISE TRANSFORMATIONS

As said: our primary way of thinking disappears over time in favour of logic, scientific (secondary process) thinking, which is highly valued in our western civilisation. And it is certainly true that we have a lot to thank it for. Yet, if we explore a bit under the surface, it looks as if our original way of mental functioning often has positive, creative influence on our much praised logic thinking. This is possible because primary thinking is never lost. It only sort of goes 'underground' from where – without interruption – it influences what happens 'above-ground'. It is this active, but largely hidden part of our mental life that Meltzer referred to as 'dream-life' (1984), thereby stressing the fact that this section of our mental life is not only active during sleep, but equally during our daily waking life (I shall illustrate this in a moment). From the moment our primary thought processes become unconscious, it is as if we live simultaneously on two levels, in two different worlds. I like to say that the only Atlantis that ever existed, and still exists, can be found in our own inner world. Moreover, it constantly sends its 'messengers' into our 'above-water' world. The problem is that we either don't see them or that we don't understand the 'languages' they use (Vansina-Cobbaert, 1993).

Before I explain and produce some vignettes concerning those 'languages', let me illustrate a few occasions where a sort of mixture of phantasmatic and logic thinking becomes visible.

Remember the little girl of the 'floating heads'? When she was almost three she got a brother, and for a long time she was very interested in pregnant mothers. One day, when she is a little over four, and comes to visit, she tells me right away, and very proudly, that when she grows up, she will become a

lady (not simply a woman), and that when she is a lady, she too will be able to grow a baby in her tummy. She explicitly stresses her own decision, as if it is all her own doing. I nod: "Yes, sure". Without interruption she continues: "And you know what, grandma, then you too can be in my tummy. Will this make you happy?" Here things become a bit trickier. So I answer somewhat more carefully: "Well, I feel happy already, when you propose this, because I think that it means that you love me very much". By then she is sitting on my lap, and I receive an enthusiastic smack. Hereafter, but with a slight hesitation and a somewhat seductive smile, she wonders: "Could I maybe be in your tummy too then?" Here I waver. Until this moment the little girl is completely immersed in her phantasmatic world. Still, her slight hesitation together with her seductive smile seem like signs of the fact that she could be ready, yet ambivalent, about leaving the phantasmatic in favour of what we like to call 'the real world'. As I do not want to rush this delicate developmental process, I draw out my "We-e-e-ll", while I think about the best way to formulate somewhat more 'realistic' possibilities. But before I have a chance to go on, she fills in. Her eyes reduced to small splits, and her face full of wrinkles, as if it is costing her an intense effort, she asks: "But it is not possible, is it? We can't go back, can we?" I hold her, and nod with a smile and a sigh, for this is indeed a big leap she has taken, a big leap into the world of logic, realistic, scientific or simply: 'down to earth' thinking. "Yes," I continue, "this is absolutely true. Once we are out we can never get back into somebody's tummy. But I don't mind you know. In the beginning it might be pleasant in there, we can float around in the water like in a comfortably warm swimming pool, but, towards the end, when we become bigger, the place gets rather tight. We have to stay curled-up all the time, and the only thing we can still enjoy is to suck our thumb. Now, as we are out, we can talk together, we can play, we can learn all kinds of things, and we can be pleased with each other." "Yes", she says with conviction, "Yes! Come, let us go out and play", as if, for the first time, she feels sure about the fact that life in the outside world is by far preferable over a stay in a narrow tummy, even if it belongs to mummy or grandma.

A few months later she added the last chapter to that part of her story. I heard it from her mother. By then the girl was almost five. One day she asked her mother if she had a baby growing in her tummy. When the mother answered: "No, not right now", the girl immediately advised: "Then ask daddy to put one in. I think it would be nice if we got a new baby". Somewhat surprised the mother wondered: "Who told you about daddy?" Whereupon the girl explained with conviction: "Nobody told me. I thought, if you are my mummy

because I grew in your tummy, then daddy must be my daddy because he put me in there!”

Well, all by herself, she had moved nicely in the direction of ‘logic’ insights. On her own, she even reproduced one of the original, primitive ‘scientific’ explanations of fertilisation. The only task left for the mother, was to fine-tune her daughter’s version of the ‘facts of life’.

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