From the Co-Editor-in-Chief

Welcome to the first issue of the Journal of Organizational Psychodynamics (JOP), a new e-journal. Several associates of the Center for the Study of Organizational Change (CSOC) agreed to participate in an experiment. We decided to launch an electronic journal that met the criteria of other scholarly journals in the social and behavioral sciences. We wanted to offer the journal free of charge, and we were committed to getting manuscripts through the blind review process, through comprehensive copy editing, and into final publication with greater efficiency. We hope you decide to routinely access the JOP for thoughtful and challenging articles on the psychoanalytic study of organizations.

This first issue publishes two papers originally presented at the 2006 CSOC Colloquium. These articles were then reviewed and edited for this first issue. The first article, entitled “Organizational Totalitarianism and the Voices of Dissent,” is written by Howard F. Stein (associate editor for the JOP). As with most of Howard Stein’s writings on the application of psychoanalytic thought to professional and organizational culture, this piece on the ideology and psychology of totalitarianism is a moral plea, if not a warning, to management and executives in the public and private sectors. Corporate and government organizations wreak havoc with their employees, stakeholders, customers, and constituents if their cultures and leaders perpetuate, wittingly and unwittingly, absolutist and totalistic belief systems intended to oppose and dismiss contrary and alternative ideas. Stein’s article is timely and pertinent to the many challenges we face today in government and public affairs as well as corporate social responsibility.

David P. Levine (co-editor-in-chief) has written the second article of our first issue: “Keeping Track of the Self: Empathy, Recognition, and the Problem of Emotional Attunement in Organizations.” Again I would say this paper is a moral plea. Whereas “Organizational Totalitarianism and the Voices of Dissent” illustrates the moral ethic of psychoanalysis on the subject of oppression and totalistic thinking, Levine’s article is about our basic and unrelenting desire for object relatedness and human contact through empathy and recognition. The question of emotional attunement in organizations reinforces the findings of contemporary organizational research to include emotional intelligence as a highly valued competence among management in the workplace. Taking off on the concerns of many contemporary psychoanalytic writers and practitioners, however, Levine is able to make an important distinction between empathy and pseudo-empathy—the latter being all too common in the rational technical and manipulative cultures of contemporary management. As with Stein’s article, Levine’s paper surfaces questions and criteria to consider in our attempts to define humane organization.

I hope you find these articles thought-provoking and stimulating. I also hope they motivate many of you to submit a paper to the JOP and to participate in our ongoing dialogue bridging the schools of thought in psychoanalysis with the study of organizations.

Michael A. Diamond, Ph.D.
Co-Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Organizational Psychodynamics
KEEPPING TRACK OF THE SELF: EMPATHY, RECOGNITION, AND THE PROBLEM OF EMOTIONAL ATTUNEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS

David P. Levine
Graduate School of International Studies
University of Denver

Abstract

In this paper, I explore the struggle over recognition in organizational life. At issue in the struggle over recognition is the way in which organizations provide those working in them an opportunity to be seen and understood in a particular way. In that struggle the emotional understanding we refer to in the language of empathy plays an important role. I consider both the links between empathy and recognition and the differences between them. The distinction between the two leads to a consideration of false forms of empathy, which I refer to as pseudo empathy.

Keywords

- attunement
- empathy
- recognition
- self
- social construction

The most primitive form of recognition occurs in the emotional connection between infant and caregiver (Winnicott, 1965). In the language of communication, the infant uses primitive methods to communicate how it feels to the caregiver, who takes that feeling in, contains and processes it, and returns it to the infant. If we use the word understand in the sense of taking in or encompassing, then through this process the caregiver achieves an understanding of the infant and conveys that understanding to it. So far as it is legitimate to use the term understanding in this sense, we can also describe this relationship as an empathic connection, which is the term we use for emotional
understanding of another person. The empathic connection affirms the infant’s emotional reality, and in this sense anticipates, on the level of emotional communication, that more advanced communication referred to in the language of recognition. Even in its more mature forms, however, recognition retains its links to the more primitive modalities of communication since recognition is also a relationship through which reality is affirmed by being known by the other. It is therefore a relationship without which reality of a special kind cannot be secured or sustained.

To provide an empathic connection, the caregiver must receive the infant’s emotional communication. This receptiveness, or emotional attunement, is essential to recognition in its primitive form. It can also play a part in more mature interchanges. Thus, some students of the psychodynamics of organizations have emphasized the importance of attunement in more mature settings (Stein, 2006). Emphasis on emotional attunement is not, of course, limited to the psychoanalytic study of organizations, but can also be found, for example, in the work of those applying the idea of emotional intelligence to leadership (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 2002). Here also the organization is viewed as a locus of emotional connection and is assumed to work well only to the degree that those responsible for work are attuned to the organization’s emotional life.

I begin my study of recognition with empathy, though not in the setting of infant and caregiver, but rather in the setting of adult life. I then consider the relationship between empathy and recognition. The distinction between the two leads to a consideration of false forms of empathy, which I refer to as pseudo empathy. Forms of pseudo empathy create attunement either by manipulating the emotional environment of the workplace in a way aimed at controlling those who work there so that their emotions are consistent with the wished-for state of managers and leaders, or so that their emotions express the manager’s adaptation of his or her emotions to the wished-for state of the employees. Following Stefano Bolognini, I consider real empathy a connection grounded in loss, specifically the loss implied in renunciation of fusion with a knowing and caring object. Pseudo empathy, by contrast, holds out the hope that fusion is still a possibility. Finally, I argue that, while use of our empathic capacity presupposes separation and individuation, insistence on empathy as an attribute of management expresses a wish to create in the organization a setting for regression to a lost state of fusion.

**Empathy**

Roy Schafer defines empathy as “the inner experience of sharing in and comprehending the momentary psychological state of another person” (as cited in Tansey and Burke, 1989, p. 56). Ernest Wolf, following Heinz Kohut, defines empathy in the clinical setting as “listening and perceiving in a certain way so as to grasp some aspects of the patient’s inner experience” (1988, pp. 131–132). According to Michael Tansey and Walter Burke, also referring to the clinical setting, “empathy is the optimal outcome that
results from the successful processing of an identification and leads to emotional knowledge of the patient’s experience” (1989, p. 58). In each case, the language used refers both to a sharing of experience and to something more. For empathy there must also be perception, comprehension, and processing. All of these words suggest that, while empathy must be closely connected to various other processes through which we share experiences with others, it should not be equated with them.

Empathy is our way of knowing how another person feels; it is not knowing how we feel or even how we would feel if we were in the other’s situation, but knowing how the other feels in his or her situation. An important aspect of the capacity for empathy, therefore, is that it presupposes the presence of reasonably secure self-boundaries of the kind that make it possible for us to know what feelings are our own and what feelings pertain to others (see Bolognini, 2004, pp. 15, 42–44). The separation of self and other is what makes it possible to discover something not already known: how other people feel.

The link between empathy and the separation of persons suggests how empathy differs from both projection and sympathy, two forms of emotional connection sometimes confused with it. Projection results in our knowing not the other but our own feelings and self-states experienced as belonging to the other. By contrast, empathy refers to the reception of the communication of feelings originating outside. So empathy defeats the purpose of projection, or at least replaces that purpose with another, which is both its opposite and implied in it. As Bolognini so forcefully insists, projection “constitutes an obstacle to knowledge, a malfunctioning of the ego, and an intrusion that is completely disruptive of the possibility of attainment of empathic situations” (2004, p. 153).

Empathy also differs from sympathy. In distinguishing the two, Stanley Olinick emphasizes the subjective aspect of sympathy, which he describes as “non-objective, highly personalized, and predominantly affective” (1984, pp. 138–139). Sympathy tends to be oriented more to the self and less to the object with the result that it often “serves an exploitative or defensive function.” Unlike empathy, sympathy is not oriented toward understanding another person, but toward subsuming others into our own emotional experience of the world. Because of this, as in projection (which may be a part of sympathetic feeling), the end tends to be misunderstanding rather than understanding.

While the term empathy is sometimes used to refer to our internal experience of another person, as suggested in Kohut’s definition of empathy as “a value-neutral mode of observation…attuned to the inner life of man,” it can also, as Kohut goes on to point out, be used to refer to our communication of our internal experience of the other to the

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1 This means that, although we may argue, as Kohut does, that empathy is a basic human endowment of man comparable to the five senses (1977, p. 144), access to the empathic capacity cannot be considered automatic or unproblematic. If, as Kohut goes on to suggest, there are obstacles to empathic understanding, then there are also preconditions for it, which are the same preconditions associated with acknowledging self-boundaries and the separation of persons.
other (Kohut, 1982; see also Schwaber, 1984). In Olinick’s words, “empathy entails specific perceptions and internal actions (e.g. fantasy) leading to a cognitive-affective understanding of the patient and, when indicated, to a verbal intervention, which may assist the patient to arrive at a comparable understanding, one that is idiomatic or idiosyncratic to the patient” (1984, p. 138). Empathy then involves not only taking in some aspect of another person’s emotional state, but returning it to them in a special form, one that includes our explicit identification of that state as what it is and to whom it belongs. This aspect of empathy also ties it to the separation of persons. While to sympathize with another we may simply express our belief that we “know how” he or she feels, empathy entails producing that knowledge explicitly in a way that assists the other to know him or her self.

Of special importance for empathy is the ability to tolerate first the separation of persons and second the holding of emotional states, both our own and those of others, inside. Because the separation of persons is an essential element in empathy, empathy calls on our capacity for tolerance, and may even be considered an element of that capacity. To empathize, we must tolerate difference, including the presence in others of feelings that make us uncomfortable either because they differ from our own or because they do not. This link between empathy and tolerance might help us understand the emergence of defenses against empathy, which can also be understood as defenses against tolerance of difference and the separation of persons. This link to the separation of persons means that the identification implied in empathy must differ from the more primitive identifications associated with other forms of emotional relating. Unlike more primitive forms, the identification associated with empathy is meant to be temporary and targeted to the purpose of processing the other’s emotional state in a particular way.

Empathy depends on our capacity for introspection. If we follow Kohut in thinking of empathy as “vicarious introspection” (1977, p. 306), then it is an extension of our capacity for introspection into the interpersonal field. Here introspection refers to our receptiveness to emotional communication, which is that ability and willingness to receive the communication referred to above as attunement. Any significant obstacles we experience to introspection must also be obstacles to empathic connection. What I refer to in this essay as strategies for defending against empathy are obstacles of this kind. So far as such obstacles may develop, we cannot be satisfied to adopt any simple or unproblematic attitude toward the matter of emotional attunement and our access to the capacity to receive emotional communication.

As popular as the idea of emotional attunement has become, it should not be assumed that the virtues of emotional attunement are either simple or self evident. And, one of the most important respects in which they are not self-evident involves the potential that emotional communication has to do damage, and the risk we incur when we open ourselves to empathic connection. This is not only because receptiveness to emotional communication does not in itself imply benevolent intent (Wolf, 1988, p. 132; see also Kohut, 1982), but also because others may experience our receptiveness as a
threat whether our intent is benevolent or not. Here, I explore one aspect of the risk involved in attunement to emotional communication and suggest how we might consider our task not simply maintaining our receptiveness to such communication, but managing our openness and the openness of our organization to it. I begin with an illustration.

**Resistance to Empathy**

During a classroom discussion of the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C., an African-American student made the following emotionally-charged statement concerning the possibility of understanding the experience of others: “If you are not black you cannot understand how I feel.” Up to that point, the conversation had been mainly about how the Museum was designed to communicate to visitors something of the experience of being transported to a concentration camp, and about how that communication operated on an emotional level. Thus, the Museum was in essence a structure designed to convey an emotional experience to those who had not had it.

In response to this interpretation of the Museum’s mission, my student insisted that no such communication or understanding is possible. The aggression attached to her statement brought the conversation in class to a halt, and, in part because of this, I was drawn to the conclusion that the student’s statement was meant to convey a somewhat different message along the following lines: “You must not understand how I feel.” By stopping the conversation, she validated her own assertion since she prevented the class from any attempt to understand how she feels.

We can imagine different reasons this student might work so hard to prevent an empathic connection. It may be that she assumed such a connection would reveal to others self-feelings, such as shame, she could not tolerate acknowledging. Alternatively, we might assume that in seeking to block understanding she sought to protect the specialness of her group identity as an African-American on the premise that allowing others to understand what those in her group experience would threaten the group’s existence, which depends on reserving for members exclusive access to its unique defining experience (Levine, 2003). This second explanation may or may not take us in a direction different from the first depending on the role of intolerable feelings such as shame in defining the group experience.

The dramatic nature of my student’s intervention led me to speculate that the events in this class were an example of the use of aggression to prevent an empathic connection because such a connection would be dangerous. What especially interested me is the possibility that connection might be experienced as threatening because it would, in its limited way, reproduce a traumatic experience. This traumatic experience might involve, as I suggest above, shame. Her unstated message, then, would be that to have shame recognized by others is to be shamed by them (Gilligan, 1996, p. 111). In other words, for her, empathy produces the experience it seeks to understand.
equation of empathy with producing an experience makes empathy a potentially dangerous connection. So far as this equation is operative, we should not move too quickly toward any simple conclusions about the role of empathy in the workplace, especially toward the conclusion that empathy will be welcome there.

This rejection of simple conclusions regarding empathy in the workplace only holds provided that empathy is not limited to sharing an experience through identification, but also involves processing that experience so that it can be understood. It is only in the latter that empathy becomes a threat. This is because those who experience intolerable self-states such as shame are all too ready to share them, especially via projective identification, so long as doing so does not lead to understanding since the latter requires that the experience be accurately located in the source of the projection rather than its target. Understanding then returns the projection to its original source, though not necessarily in the same form it had when projected outside. Processing of the communication and then returning it to its source can mean that empathy is not in fact a threat of the kind imagined by those seeking to protect themselves against it. That it is not such a threat, or at least need not be, does not however mean that it is not imagined to be a threat.

That my student experienced the prospect of being understood in the way she did suggests two things about empathy that are important when we consider its place in the world of work. First, empathy is a relationship of a particular kind and therefore can be welcomed or rejected depending on the psychic meaning that relatedness with others has for the individual; and second, empathy as a form of relatedness has a setting appropriate to it, and it may therefore be rejected because the setting is felt to be inappropriate. As Ping-Nie Pao emphasizes, making use of our empathic capacity “is not a solo activity,” but “a process in which the two participants—the one who desires to understand and the one who desires to be understood—must both participate” (1983). The communicative network required for empathy cannot be put in place without the participation of both persons. And within this network the person with whom we want to empathize must, on his or her part, “make an effort to want to be understood.” The idea that empathy takes place within a communicative network has significant implications for the idea that empathy might be of use in organizations, particularly if we bear in mind that the communicative network to which Pao refers involves the kind of intimate connection available only under special circumstances, and, that empathy, in Olinick’s words, “occurs only in a situation of intimate dyadic communication” (1984, p. 163).

If my student needs to work so hard to prevent an empathic connection, we might surmise that it is not only the empathy of others that she needs to block, but her own, and that her use of aggression to block the empathic connection must also be the source of a significant impairment in her own capacity for empathy, which she would also experience as a threat. To the extent that what others must not know about her is something she also must not know about herself, her resistance to the empathy of others is an expression of her need to defend against her own capacity for introspection. Our
ability to make contact with others depends on our ability to make contact with our selves (Grotstein, 1984; Bolognini, 2004, pp. 77–78). This aspect of the problem becomes especially important when we consider emotional attunement as a part of our effort to keep track of our selves.

**Pseudo Empathy**

If empathy helps us make contact with our selves, then if we are strongly resistant to making contact with our selves we may seek out settings and relationships in which something else is offered to us. If this something is offered under the name of understanding, even empathy, then what we have in place of empathy is what I will refer to as pseudo empathy. As an example, consider the use of emotional attunement as it is conceived by Daniel Goleman, an influential advocate of the use of what he refers to as empathy in leadership.

Goleman begins with the link between an organization’s emotional tone and worker performance: “If people’s emotions are pushed toward the range of enthusiasm, performance can soar….When leaders drive emotions positively…they bring out everyone’s best” (2002, p. 5). Moods have significant impact on work and a leader who can manage emotions can significantly improve work effectiveness. Bad moods erode mental abilities and “powerfully disrupt work” (ibid., p. 13). By contrast, “when people feel good, they work at their best” (p. 14). Attunement is a relationship skill used to manage the emotional tone of the workplace and keep it in the positive range consistent with employees doing their jobs effectively. Attunement creates resonance with those working in the organization, and when leadership resonates emotionally, followers “vibrate with the leader’s upbeat and enthusiastic energy.” Attunement is used, then, to “manage and direct” (p. 20) feelings so they can be moved in a positive direction.

Goleman proceeds to connect positive feelings to hope: “…resonant leadership grounded in a shared set of constructive values keeps emotions resounding in the positive register. It invites people to take a leap of faith through a word picture of what’s possible, creating a collective aspiration” (p. 24). People have constructive values and can be moved into a positive emotional state by a leader who mobilizes their hopes for the future. The resonant leader resonates with his or her followers’ constructive values, and especially with their hopes.

Resonance used in this sense refers to activating desires and expectations for primitive forms of emotional connection, especially those associated with fusion with a leader. Consider the following example:

The head of a unit hires a facilitator for a retreat intended to develop a strategic plan. Those in the unit have exhibited a significant degree of

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2 The events recounted here actually took place in a unit with which the author was once associated.
resistance to the project, which they view with a combination of skepticism, indifference and hostility expressed mainly in the form of passive resistance. The facilitator is informed of this problem in advance of the retreat. During the retreat, he adopts the strategy of confronting the group with affect sharply opposed to what he had been told was predominant there. He is unrelentingly positive, energetic, engaged. He actively provokes interaction with individuals previously disengaged from the process. Virtually by force of will, he alters the group’s mood in a direction not unreasonably described as “upbeat” and “enthusiastic.” He leaves convinced that this is a high-energy unit and that he has done a good job of facilitating work on its strategic plan. The unit head concurs in this judgment and considers the retreat a success. Within a few weeks, a draft of the strategic plan is written, submitted and accepted. Subsequent to that point, the plan is never consulted, and soon forgotten.

In considering this example we may wonder whether the response to the facilitator expressed the way in which those in the unit shared his constructive values and resonated with his upbeat enthusiasm, or expressed their collusion with the facilitator’s attempt to hide the unit’s real feelings and find safe refuge in a shared fantasy of high energy and forward thinking. Was this an example of the use of empathy to promote a positive work environment, or of what we might refer to as pseudo empathy, which in this case is also a manic defense against the group’s real feelings, a defense offered to and, at least temporarily accepted by, the group? Part of this defense would, then, be expressed in the conviction, also shared, that the emotional reality of the group is created in the act of recognition, so that the group becomes a lively affair by being recognized as such, just as its hopes become real through instilling the conviction that they are.

If we reverse the process just considered, we arrive at an alternative way of relating that appears to approximate empathy more closely, but is also an instance of pseudo empathy. In this alternative mode of relating, the manager, rather than seeking to impose his wished–for emotional state on the employee, seeks to encourage in the employee the conviction that his or her emotions are shared. Here, pseudo-empathy gets expressed in the common language of sharing: “I hear you”; “I understand how you feel”; “I know what you mean.” Through the use of language such as this, the manager taps into a hope that difference can be overcome and merger with a knowing and caring object achieved. Like the first case of attunement just considered, but unlike true empathy, this strategy seeks not to respect the separation of persons but to overcome it.

This second form of pseudo empathy can strongly appeal to managers for different reasons. One possibility is that the manager really does not know how he feels and tends therefore to see in the strongly held feelings of others a possible solution to the problem posed by his own lack of emotional connection with himself. Another possibility is that the manager seeks to foster the illusion of merger in order to protect him or her self from the danger posed by others who are assumed to react to difference with aggression. The other’s assumed intolerance of difference then encourages a strategy that denies
difference and offers as a substitute the adjustment of the individual’s emotional state to that of the object, or at least fosters the illusion that such an adjustment is taking place.

This second strategy has an interesting connection to the experience I had with the student recounted above. At first glance, my student would seem to be fending off any effort on my part not only to empathize but to offer attunement of the type just briefly described, since the last thing my student seemed to want was for me to “hear,” “understand,” or “know” her feelings. Yet, if we assume for a moment that her resistance to being understood reflected her need to defend against self-understanding, we can also say that she sought to share something important about her internal life with others: its unknowability and the way one feels when one’s inner world is unknowable. In other words, she sought to promote an identification between self and other of a special kind, and in this respect what she was doing is not inconsistent with the second form of pseudo empathy just considered.

Whether we should refer to these two forms of pseudo empathy as attunement or not depends on how narrowly we define the term. After all, we can say that those who embrace the idea of primal or resonant leadership and those who offer false understanding all seek to achieve attunement if by that we mean a state in which two persons share, or imagine they share, the same wished-for emotional state. The difficulty with this conclusion is two fold. First, both strategies encourage a fantasy of sharing rather than a real connection; and, second, both foster a fantasy of sharing not a real, but a wished-for, emotional state. Thus, both can be said to take the manager further away from, rather than closer to, a connection with the real emotions current in the workplace.

In the end, to the extent that emotional connection is created by the kinds of identification just considered, attunement has very little meaning: we do not seek attunement with the emotional states of others, but control over them. After all, the term attunement suggests that emotional states in other persons are to some significant degree independent of our control. Real attunement might, however, be an important capacity in management since it would point management to an important part of the organizational reality that bears on the capacity of the organization for work and creativity.

That through our attunement we can identify the emotional reality of the workplace does not, however, mean that we can do anything to make it more consistent with the goals of work and creativity. Indeed, the two strategies just considered under the heading of pseudo empathy are much more likely to succeed in having a rapid and observable effect on the workplace than true empathy, precisely because the latter is constituted out of respect for self-boundaries and the separation of persons and therefore does not sustain primitive merger fantasies and the hope for an all-knowing and caring object. As one student of empathy notes, empathy is “made possible only at the price of suffering a loss” (Bolognini, 2004, p. 43), which is the loss associated with the renunciation of fusion. Yet, organizations often hold out the hope that this loss can be made good, a hope built into both forms of pseudo empathy just considered.
Recognition

Because empathy “occurs only in a situation of intimate dyadic communication” (Olinick, 1984, p. 63), we must proceed with caution if we are to apply the term to institutions, organizations, or more broadly to systems of interaction encompassing more than two persons, since these are not places where intimate communication is typical or appropriate. There is, however, a related concept that carries some of the meaning associated with empathy forward to the more impersonal world of interaction, and that is the concept of recognition. Recognition bears a complex relationship to empathy since, on one side empathy can be considered a special form of recognition, that form appropriate to intimate dyadic communication, and on the other side recognition can be considered something distinct from empathy since it seeks not understanding of what is idiosyncratic to the individual’s personal experience of the self, but what is universal about the individual’s self. Exploring this complex relationship between empathy and recognition can, I think, reveal something important about the human experience of organizational life.

Jessica Benjamin defines recognition as “that response from the other which makes meaningful the feelings, intentions, and actions of the self” (1988, p. 12). This definition clearly links recognition to empathy and even tends to equate the two. Benjamin goes on to insist that recognition does not merely understand the self, it empowers the self: it “allows the self to realize its agency and authorship in a tangible way” (ibid.). So far, however, as we equate the self with the center of initiative and agency (Kohut, 1977, pp. 176–177), the self that cannot “realize its agency” is no self and what is at stake in recognition is not simply empowering, but constituting, the self. Thus, if we continue the equation of understanding with recognition, recognition creates the self through an act of understanding; the way others understand (equals recognize) the self is what the self becomes. One becomes a self by being recognized as a self, and one ceases to be a self when recognition of self-hood is withheld. Thus, “if the other denies me recognition, my acts have no meaning” (Benjamin, 1988, p. 53). My student’s fear, put now in the language of recognition, was that recognition, rather than empowering her self, would destroy it, or would affirm and even reenact an earlier act of destruction. Understood in this way, whether recognition empowers or destroys, it is the constitutive force of the self.

Benjamin’s definition of recognition tends either to equate it with empathy or to subsume empathy under recognition as a special case. Important differences between the two become apparent, however, when we take into account the emphasis Benjamin places on reciprocity in recognition (1992). Following Hegel, Benjamin sees recognition as a relation in which both parties are, in the same act, constituted as persons. The idea is that I can only be recognized (that is constituted) as a person by another who is capable of doing so, which is to say is also a person. But since the capacity denoted by personhood is constituted by recognition, for me to be recognized by another I must in the same act recognize (that is, constitute) their personhood. Thus, for Benjamin, the importance of
recognition is in the way it draws our attention to the constitution of personhood as an intersubjective reality.

It is difficult, however, to treat empathy as a reciprocal relationship in this sense. To be sure, empathy is an intersubjective relationship, as is implied in Pao’s notion of a communicative network. We can even go so far as to say that resistance to empathy implies an intersubjective transaction, since the person refusing the empathic connection clearly recognizes the offer and the one who makes it, and does so in the act of recognizing the threat that offer contains. Yet, while intersubjective in this sense, empathy is not reciprocal in Hegel’s sense, but rather a relationship through which one party empathizes with another who does not at the same time and in the same act reciprocate. The two parties may, of course, change positions, so that the object of empathy may become its source, but this is not implied in the concept nor is it the same as reciprocity in recognition in Hegel’s sense of the term.

The difference between the two can be thought of developmentally, with the reciprocal relationship operating at a higher level of emotional development. Here, I will follow this line of thinking and distinguish recognition from empathy on the basis of the different points along a developmental line occupied by the two positions in the relationship, treating recognition as a relation between those more or less equal and empathy as an asymmetric relationship. In so doing, I would like to focus attention on some implications of the distinction between recognition and empathy, while still bearing in mind that there are ways in which empathy can be considered a special form of recognition.

An important aspect of the distinction just drawn is that recognition, in contrast to empathy, tends to abstract from the uniquely particular dimension of individual life, which is precisely the dimension that empathy attempts to grasp. One important attribute of more primitive emotional connections is that they are more concrete and particular. Emotional development enables the individual to relate to others at a more abstract level, one that does not necessarily take into account their uniqueness. The problem that arises when the distinction between empathy and recognition is occluded is that we lose track of the important difference between a relationship that acknowledges our more abstract social identity and one that understands our unique experience. Our capacity to carry our universal status as persons in our own right into the world of other persons enables us to participate in recognition. The development of that capacity relies on the experience of more primitive forms of recognition, especially empathy.

Vital to this development is the transition in the forms of relatedness with, and in the character of our dependence on, other persons. This transition is usually considered in the language of dependence and autonomy and of separation and individuation. As Kohut and Winnicott, among others, have emphasized, in the early stages of this process, and to

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3 Benjamin suggests something along these lines when she introduces Winnicott’s distinction between relating to and use of the object (Winnicott, 1971).
a lesser degree throughout, empathy plays a vital role. In Winnicott’s language, however, this role is not to constitute the self, but to facilitate its natural process of development. In other words, recognition in the primitive form of empathy is not the constitutive relation of the self but an essential part of a facilitating environment in which the self can develop. This also means that the power recognition has over the self fades with the self’s development to maturity, even if that power never wholly dissipates. In the transition from empathy to recognition, the power of the relationship diminishes since it is no longer required for the presence of the self as a center of initiative and action. Now, when we recognize selfhood, we recognize or affirm something that is already present rather than creating something new through our interaction.

Internalization is a vital part of the change in psychic structure that serves to limit the power of recognition (empathy) over the self. Internalization of a good-enough object relation establishes the basis for emotional independence and therefore also for securing the self-other boundary so vital for the development of a capacity for empathy. Failure to internalize a good-enough object relation leaves us vulnerable to a predominance of bad internal objects and this fosters strategies for coping with self-hate that violate self-boundaries and enhance our vulnerability to others. This vulnerability can then take the form of the “overdependence on external admiration and acclaim” that Otto Kernberg associates with pathological narcissism (1986, p. 246). Insistence on the power of recognition to constitute the self as a psychic reality then expresses not what is inherent in being a self, but the weakness of the internalized good object-relation.

If internalization limits our dependence on external objects, it also limits our dependence on recognition. Then, internalization of a good-enough object-relation means that we are no longer so dependent on others to invest meaning in our “feelings, intentions, and actions” (1988, p. 12) as Benjamin insists we are. This does not, however, mean that we have no dependence on others in our search for meaning. In particular, while recognition may not constitute the self, it may still constitute an aspect of identity that is an important expression of the presence of a self. Identity refers here to the concrete being of a self: its embodiment in specific activities, its acquisition of specific skills and expertise, and its accumulation of and emotional investment in specific experiences. And this identity may depend in part at least on recognition. Thus, to be a professor, I must have acquired expertise, but I must also enter into a contract with an institution empowered to make me a professor by recognizing that I am. The same might be said of other aspects of my identity such as citizenship. There remain, then, important domains of human endeavor in which we depend on recognition, and those are precisely the larger world of institutions and organizations. The meaning we seek there is not that of being or not being a self. Rather it is the meaning of that part of our being that exists and can only exist in its recognition by others. Yet, this is not the use to which Benjamin primarily refers us in her discussion of recognition. Rather she refers to the use of recognition to constitute the self in Kohut’s sense as a “center of initiative and perception.”

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4 On the importance of internalization for autonomy, see Pine (1989) and Tansey and Burke (1989, p. 48).
Continuing appeal to recognition to constitute the self has importance in institutions and organizations. Indeed, what I refer to above as the struggle over recognition is the struggle to use or not to use institutions for the work of constituting the self. To consider some further implications of the constitutive use of the notion of recognition, let me begin with a comment offered by Nancy Fraser, a well-known author on the subjects of diversity, multiculturalism, and the politics of recognition. In this comment, Fraser insists that neither equal opportunity nor even strong redistributive policies will solve the problems faced by those ascribed membership in oppressed and denigrated groups. Rather, she insists, the solution to the problem of denigrated identity must involve “upwardly revaluing disrespected identities and the cultural products of maligned groups; recognizing and positively valorizing cultural diversity; or transforming wholesale societal patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication in ways that would change everyone’s social identity” (2003, p. 13).

Fraser’s comment is, in its way, a vivid expression of the limitations of some widely favored prescriptions for social problems that ignore how those problems engage constructions of the self and the meaning invested in self-experience. Her comment is also interesting for the way it conceives the self and self-experience as essentially expressions of the self-other relationship, and for the power she invests in recognition and in the words spoken by those from whom we seek recognition. Fraser’s comment, then, engages a powerful wish and the hope through which it is expressed. This is the wish that a troubling psychic reality can be changed from the outside, thus that it is not a psychic reality at all. This is, I suspect, a deeply ingrained and powerful fantasy in no way limited to advocates of the politics of recognition. Indeed, it can also reveal something important about the emotional use of organizations. For this reason, I think it will be helpful to consider the matter of recognition more closely.

In Fraser’s construction, shame is not essentially our hate for and attack on our selves, but the hate others express toward us. Or, more precisely, our self-hate is simply an expression of the way others see our selves. This makes shame the product of recognition, and, in this sense, embeds it in a relationship rather than in the intra-psychic world. To my way of thinking, this denies the most salient feature of shame, which is the sure knowledge, however hidden that knowledge may be from our awareness, that our selves are without value. In other words, it seeks to deny the presence of, and our identification with, a bad internal object. This denial takes a specific form, which is the use of projective identification to transfer the bad object to, and to control the words spoken by, the other. Control assures that the other acts as the container for the bad object, and indeed, accepts that he is the bad object.

This work of projective identification is closely tied to the special use of language implied in the politics of recognition briefly summarized in Fraser’s comment. Indeed, I would argue that the essential point about the politics of recognition is the conviction implicit in it that the words spoken by others have the power to alter our psychic reality. The use of this method to control relationships indicates the dominance of primitive
thought processes of the kind we might in other contexts refer to as “magical thinking.” In primitive thought processes, words create the reality to which they refer. My suggestion, then, is that the power attributed to words in the politics of recognition is a signal that interaction remains conceived in the primitive emotional space of the infant or young child who hopes and fears he will by primitive verbal and physical communication invoke the good or bad object. The attribution of this special power to speaking the words is also typical of much management rhetoric, which in this respect runs along lines parallel to those of the politics of recognition. We often find management speaking in the indicative voice, and by implication seeking to attach the organization to valued attributes by asserting that it is, or must be, so. It may be, then, that management rhetoric and the politics of recognition are simply two particular expressions of the more general phenomenon with which we are here concerned: the use of recognition as a language constitutive of the self.

The idea of recognition highlights an important aspect of my student’s experience recounted earlier: the equation of understanding an experience with creating it. To the extent that self-states are understood as states of relatedness with others, and so far as we understand relatedness as meaning recognition, then the equation of understanding with creating does apply in the interpersonal field, and my student was not incorrect in assuming, however unconsciously, that to protect herself from unacceptable self-states she needed to protect herself from empathy. Her own overdependence on external objects in regulating self-esteem made this equation all too real for her.

If we seriously consider this possibility, then we might say about my student that recognition would be the last thing she wanted, and that she was prepared to mobilize substantial aggression in an effort to prevent the possibility that she might be recognized. What is especially interesting is that the act aimed at blocking empathy, and therefore recognition, was also, in its way, a demand for recognition, recognition of the specialness of her experience, the way that experience set her apart (presumably as a member of a group of those special in the same way). This complex emotional situation is closely linked to the relationship between empathy and tolerance of difference alluded to above. In this case, to be empathic and thus attuned to my student would be discordant with her wished-for self-assessment. In this “ego-dystonic empathy,” the subject and object of the empathic connection are not in agreement (Bolognini, 2004, pp. 38, 120). The possibility that empathy may take this form has significant implications for how we understand the role of attunement in organizations.

Recognition may be an expression either of empathy or of its opposite. When recognition expresses the opposite of empathy, that is when it expresses the necessity that we fail to know the other, the confusion of recognition with empathy dispels the complexity involved in achieving an empathic connection and makes doing so appear a simple matter of acquiring what Goleman (2002, p. 51) refers to as a relationship management skill. The term relationship skill refers here not to empathy, but to our attunement to the self those in the workplace would have us recognize as part of their
strategy to block empathy. Thus recognition may operate apart from, and even in opposition to, empathy, and this operation of recognition apart from empathy may have special importance in organizations.

Recognition and the Social Construction of the Self

An important aspect of the distinction between empathy and recognition, and one alluded to earlier, is that recognition operates in the realm of ideas while empathy operates at the level of emotional communication. Put another way, recognition seeks to secure an attachment of self to an idea about the self. Doing so necessarily distances, or abstracts, the self from what is particular to it, including its particular experiences and the special meaning they have. Empathy, by contrast, is always closely tied to what is concrete and particular to the individual and his or her unique experience.

The effort implied in recognition to attach ourselves to an idea about the self can be part of an effort to distance ourselves from the possibility that we will be understood, thus an effort to prevent empathy; or, it can be part of an effort to find the self, which is to say that part of the self that only exists in its connection to what is abstract and universal. Thus, for example, thinking of ourselves as bearers of professional identities—doctors, lawyers, professors—need not distance us from meaningful and real attachments when we are in fact doctors, lawyers, or professors and those attachments have emotional significance for us. Ideas can also, however, become vehicles for misunderstanding the self when recognition is used to create a substitute reality in the interpersonal world that can assist us in hiding a reality in the inner world. By interpersonal reality I am not now referring to the empathic understanding by which my personal experience becomes known to another yet remains my personal experience. Rather, I am referring to a reality constructed in and for the interaction between two or more persons.

An example of what I refer to here is the substitution of outrage for rage. Outrage takes a personal emotional experience and redefines it in the sphere of justice and injustice. If we simply experience rage then our experience is essentially internal to us. We are in some sense responsible for it. But, if we experience outrage then our internal experience is simply the reflection of external factors acting on us and of others with whom it is shared, and it is understood as an expression of our commitment to abstract ideals such as justice and right. We cannot, however, turn rage into outrage by ourselves since outrage, because it is linked to the matter of justice, exists only in a shared interpersonal reality of ideals.

Organizations can play an important part in this sort of transformation because they can instantiate the shift from the personal to the interpersonal, from inner emotional experience to socially constructed reality, from the particular to the universal. The fact that organizations are essentially vehicles we use to instantiate ideas makes them likely settings for the struggle over the use of recognition. Since the workplace is a locus for an interpersonal reality of the self, it will also seem an appropriate setting for the work of
abstracting the self to obscure its internal reality. Pressure to use the workplace as a
vehicle for the social construction of reality builds with growing dominance of denigrated
and unacceptable aspects of self-experience in the psyches of those working there. The
result is not simply the use of the organization to substitute recognition for empathy, but
the use of recognition to provide what I have referred to as pseudo empathy.

Substituting recognition for empathy can be part of a strategy to protect ourselves
against empathy. Understood as expressions of this strategy, organizations become the
embodiments of the idea of recognition when that is given a specific meaning, which is
the emotional misunderstanding that stands as the opposing pole to empathy. As a field of
recognition, the organization makes the emotional misunderstanding of those working in
it objectively real.

This is essentially what Fraser asks us to do: to turn shame into pride by
recognizing it as its opposite, which we can do by changing the ideas of self and other
embodied in institutions. As the embodiment of institutionalized ends, the real purpose of
the organization is to bring about this transformation, and through recognition make it
real. This is the sense in which the organization becomes a field of recognition. For this
strategy to succeed, emotional attunement must take a special form. The purpose of doing
so is to make an idea real and by so doing to realize a hope.

The hope to which I have just referred is not specific to those burdened by the
denigrated group identities that are the special concern of the politics of recognition. To
be sure, members of those groups may act as symbolic repositories for it, but in so doing,
they merely represent for the larger culture its profound expectation about organizations
and institutions, an expectation Howard Stein (1994) refers to as the “dream of culture.”
In the end, the field of recognition is all about hope and the use of organizations as
vehicles of hope.

Keeping Track of the Self

Psychoanalytically influenced students of organizations have long emphasized the
importance for managers of emotional knowledge in the workplace and of the need for
managers to attend to the emotional setting of work (Diamond, 2003, p. 5). Their reasons
for doing so are, I think, compelling and follow more or less inevitably from the profound
emotional investments individuals make in work and in the connections with others
implied in a shared involvement in an organization. The emotional knowledge of the
psychoanalytically trained observer is distinctive in ways I have sought to emphasize
here, especially in that it accurately assigns emotions to persons rather than participating
in the false assignment implied in various largely unconscious strategies used to avoid
knowing what the emotions are and to whom they belong. This accurate assignment of
real emotions across an interpersonal field is the best definition we have of true emotional attunement.\(^5\)

I have described the capacity for attunement in the language of tolerance. What we must tolerate to achieve attunement is the loss of hope for primitive identification, a hope so powerfully activated in organizational settings. The struggle between hope and tolerance, and the resulting balance between the two then determines the matter of the use of attunement in the organization. An unfavorable outcome for tolerance means an environment ill suited for attunement.

If the psychoanalytic study of organizations is to have a practical purpose it must be in part at least because emotional attunement enhances the work of management. It may be the case, however, that our ability to take in and understand emotions in the workplace does not enable us to alter them in a way more consistent with work, and that emotional attunement does not, at least in most cases, enhance the organization’s work environment. An unfavorable judgment on the question of enhancing the emotional environment of work need not, however, make the development and use of skills associated with emotional attunement unimportant to those working in management. A more modest goal may still be achieved, which is the goal of enabling management to cope better with the complexity and stresses of organizational and group life. This is the goal I refer to as keeping track of the self (Levine, 2001).

Empathy enables us to keep track of our selves; pseudo empathy enables us to lose track of our selves. The struggle over recognition, then, is a struggle between two impulses, one to keep track and the other to lose track of the self. Organizations can enter into this struggle in various ways depending on how they are arranged to deal with recognition, the kind of recognition they are arranged to offer, and the dimension of the self they recognize.

**About the Author**

David Levine is Professor of Economics in the Graduate School of International Studies at the University of Denver. He has published several dozen articles and ten books in economics and political economy including most recently *Poverty, Work and Freedom: Political Economy and the Moral Order* (with S. Rizvi, Cambridge, 2005). He has also published in the field of applied psychoanalysis, where his book, *Attack on Government: Fear, Distrust, and Hatred in Public Life* (Pitchstone Publishers), appeared in 2004. He has published papers on group and organizational dynamics; the psychology of teaching and learning; and ethics, tolerance, and difference. His current research interests include:

\(^5\) Beyond attunement, there is the important matter of understanding the origins of emotions and the configuration of the individual’s internal object world, an understanding not generally available in the organizational setting.
the role of government in a liberal society, organizational ethics, and the psychology of work.

*Correspondence:* Dr. David Levine, Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208, USA

*E-mail:* dlevine@du.edu

**References**


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