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Michael A. Diamond
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What is This?
Repetition and the Compulsion to Repeat: Psychodynamic Challenges in Organizational Learning and Change

Michael A. Diamond

Abstract
While individuals productively use repetition to learn and develop new skills and competencies, they also engage in compulsive and counterproductive repetitions. This article makes a contribution to the literature on organizational learning and change by offering an exploration of the human proclivity for repetition and psychosocial phenomenon of the compulsion to repeat. The article links psychoanalytic theory with organization learning and change, to address the question: How is the tendency for repetition, constructive and destructive, addressed in organizational change processes? A case example is presented and discussed throughout this exploration of organizational change and the compulsion to repeat.

Keywords
passive repetitions, compulsions, narrative themes, learning, organizational change

1University of Missouri, Columbia, USA

Corresponding Author:
Michael A. Diamond, Center for the Study of Organizational Change, Harry S. Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211, USA
Email: diamondm@missouri.edu
The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.

Albert Einstein

Certainly from the perspective of conscious judgment there is a passage of time in which Infant R does X, Boy R does Y, Mr. R does Z—and it is a real psychoanalytic breakthrough to see that X, Y, and Z have something in common. Thus, there is genuine insight to see that (X, Y, and Z) form a structure of repetition . . .

Jonathan Lear, 2005, p. 46

Introduction

Human beings are undeniably repetitive in thoughts and actions. Repetition is a normal and inescapable human characteristic. In play and sport, art, poetry, and music, individuals engage in repetition. While individuals productively use repetition (in reflective practice; see Schon, 1983; also see Diamond, 2007) to learn and develop new skills and competencies, they also engage in compulsive and counterproductive repetitions of a defensive nature. This article offers an exploration of individual repetition and the compulsion to repeat in organizations. In doing so, I link psychoanalytic theory with organization theory, learning and change, to address the question: How is the natural tendency for repetition, productive and unproductive, constructive and destructive, addressed in organizational change processes?

I begin with a case example.¹ A veteran police chief of 25 years in the department was rather set in his ways. He was convinced that complaints by his officers in the field were mostly unfounded and otherwise “typical of any police department.” The chief and his management team of captains rarely, if ever, went out on shifts with the patrol officers. Rather, the captains’ job responsibilities as outlined by their chief did not require them to do so. The police chief and captains spent most of their working hours during the day behind a desk and relied on the police sergeants for information of street-level policing. Consequently, one of the “chief” complaints of patrol officers and their sergeants about the chief and his captains was that they were out of touch with the “reality” of police work and did not understand the challenges of everyday policing on the downtown streets and in the neighborhood communities. The chief’s dismissive attitude about the complaints of his sergeants and patrol officers was mirrored in the attitudes of his captains.
Predictably the patrol officers were resentful and angry, experiencing the chief and his captains as “unappreciative,” and as “remote, disapproving parents.” Consequently, sabotage (such as abusing police vehicles, not engaging in traffic stops, unnecessarily aggressive behavior) and inappropriate practices on behalf of the patrol officers occurred frequently, reinforcing the captains’ and chief’s shared view of patrol officers as “juveniles.”

A repetitive cycle of negative attributions and self-sealing processes ensued between them with no foreseen end to the conflict. This seemingly automatic and unconscious collective compulsion to repeat was unproductive and destructive to working relationships. The “dismissive” and “withholding” police chief and his captains were too anxious and defensive to investigate and address the concerns of police officers, and the “angry and rejected” police officers were resistant to hearing the perspective of the chief and his group of compliant captains. Polarization, fragmentation, and unresolved conflict between the groups perpetuated over time. An unconscious compulsion to repeat these polarizing relational dynamics reinforced a dysfunctional status quo within the police department. Participants appeared to passively accept and defensively give in to what they rationalized was either typical of other police departments, or what they assumed was simply irrec- oncilable differences between the groups.

**Organizational Diagnosis and Feedback: Confronting a Destructive Repetitive Cycle**

A method of organizational study and change was applied, which included organizational diagnosis and feedback (Levinson, 1972, 2002). The organizational diagnosis tells the organizational story, which is a narrative describing thematic and repetitive relational dynamics (Diamond & Allcorn, 2009). In the case of the police department, the organizational researcher told the story of an organization of persistent structural and psychological fragmentation, a police department in disrepair—a self-sealing process manifesting a deeper collective compulsion to repeat. How might the negative repetition causing conflict, dysfunction, unproductive blaming, and defensive reactions be acknowledged with insight and then diminished by change in the status quo?

In pursuit of confronting this unspeakable, automatic, and previously unconscious compulsion to repeat an “us and them” social structure of disavowal and scapegoating, the method of organizational diagnosis and change, and the theory that guides observation and interpretation, often begins with observations above the surface manifestations of latent emotions. These initial
observations attend to cognitive-behavioral processes of organizational learning and action (Argyris & Schon, 1996). The cognitive-behavioral perspective represents how many organizational theorists and change practitioners think about the link between habitual repetition and what they would call “single-loop and self-sealing processes, limited learning, and change.” However, systemic learning and change are frequently inhibited by individual and relational compulsions to repeat. Attending to self-sealing interpersonal and organizational processes, which reinforce the status quo with defensive reasoning, routines, and so-called “undiscussables,” is a necessary but ultimately insufficient level of analysis and intervention. This above the surface approach to change proffers a description of organizations as systems of learning, which typically involves a reflective practice of illustrating or mapping out cognitive and behavioral processes at work.

Moving from the manifest to the latent content, shifting collective attention of participants from above the surface to deeper relational, perceptual, and experiential processes, however, requires the application of a psychodynamic framework. This clinical hermeneutic approach further explains the cognitive-behavioral and emotional circularity of repetition and its implications for organizational change. In the following discussion, I intend to link organizational learning, psychoanalytic theory, and the compulsion to repeat through concepts of transference, countertransference, grief, and mourning. Unconscious and automatic processes such as these must be understood consciously and at a level of self-awareness that eventually transcends the compulsion to repeat in personal and professional relationships. This awareness leads to the possibility of breaking away from destructive and unproductive self and other relationships through the conscious processes of grief and mourning. Hans Loewald’s distinction between passive reproductive forms of repetition and active recreative forms is also discussed. This contrast provides an insightful framework for interpreting collective acts of repetition in organizations. Finally, the concepts of organizational stories or narrative tales (as a component of organizational diagnosis and the method of organizational change noted above) are presented as a “royal road” to capturing and assessing destructive and constructive repetition (ineffective and increasingly effective learning) in organizational cultures. As in the case of the police department, routines and rituals comprising organizational culture were eventually taken for granted and rendered unconscious. The purpose of any productive intervention ought to be assisting participants by lifting their awareness and level of consciousness about work processes and dynamics. Such interventions confront compulsive and schizoid organizational cultures such as the police department with their passive and destructive repetitive dynamics.
Defensive Organizational Cultures and Passive Repetitions

Bureaucracy and administration theorists (Weber, Merton, Crozier, Argyris, and Diamond) in the past have asserted that routine and repetitive structures of authority and accountability insure clarity of tasks, roles, and responsibility. Some psychoanalytic theorists in the object relations tradition of groups and organizations such as Otto Kernberg claim that bureaucratic structures might assist management in minimizing the human proclivity of individuals to engage in psychologically regressive, counterproductive, and, at times, destructive behavior in groups and organizations (Bion, 1959; Freud, 1921; Kernberg, 1998). Configurations of authority and interpersonal relationships at work produce and perpetuate collective identities and ideologies in the form of organizational cultures. These institutional cultures are shaped by repetitive thematic and patterned narratives signifying experientially shared organizational stories, metaphors, and histories. Due in part, however, to the institutionalization of repetition and routine in the service of production, organizational members become oblivious to their workplace culture and practices. Defensive routines become automatic and commonplace. As noted above, these structured and sometimes mechanistic environments grow to be comfortingly familiar, taken for granted, and unconscious to their participants. This was certainly the case with the police department where the chief and his captains settled into a predictable office routine insulated from the police officers’ and the realities of their unpredictable and dangerous task environment. For both groups in relation to each other, repetition and acting-out replaced remembering and conscious awareness of their respective roles in producing and reproducing conflict and dysfunction on a daily basis.

The sense of familiarity and sameness that comes from routine may be experienced as comforting to some, if only because eventually the taken for granted is rendered unconscious. Weberian bureaucratic structure (Weber, 1947), command and control, and paramilitary organizational designs such as in the case of the police department appear rational on the surface. The individual and group participants (workers) come to experience the routine and repetitive social structures as rigid, confining, habitual, and automatic. Although the chief and his captains found such routines comforting in a defensive and rationalized manner, police officers experienced these same structures and organizational leadership as inaccessible, uncaring, and dismissive. Consequently, the police department could be depicted as a detached organizational culture with a schizoid identity. The schizoid identity characterized the manner in which detachment and the fortress
mentality of the chief and his captains reproduced and perpetuated a culture of mistrust and a department of us against them. A lack of leadership led to a deeply fragmented organization. In *The Unconscious Life of Organizations*, Diamond (1993) writes,

> In sum, organizational identity implies that many repetitive and, frequently ritualistic, patterns of interaction within work groups and among participants are, for organizational members, purposeful, but not necessarily conscious, psychological defenses against threatening events and relationships. These defensive patterns, ultimately, result in the construction of rational administrative processes of organizations that regulate threats to personal security and self-esteem by structuring and defining organizational life. (Diamond, 1993, p. 90)

Changes within human systems (individuals, groups, and organizations) call for conscious awareness of repetitive and fragmented structures of thinking, emoting, and acting that are tacitly accepted without critical reflection. Fragmented (or schizoid) psychological structures are mirrored by fragmented social structures and relational systems and vice versa. Psychological processes of internalization and externalization, introjections and projection, produce an interactive mirroring effect. Categorical absolutes are then contrived out of defensive acts of social and psychological splitting, producing a Manichean psychology of us versus them, black versus white, love versus hate, and all versus nothing. These structures of repetition are reinforced by “infantile” (using this concept descriptively and developmentally not pejoratively) fragmented thinking and interpersonal dynamics. Such regressive organizational and interpersonal interactions perpetuate polarized and rigidified conflicts, which to the outside observer appear unending and irreconcilable.

Attempting deep change is akin to partaking in what philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear (2005) calls the “primordial struggle”; potential or anticipated change that is often met with defensive resistance and aggression rooted in individual and group anxieties over loss of identity and existential threats. These anxieties around loss are associated with attachments to “objects” such as routine social structures and role formations on one level and primitive maternal (internal) object relations on a deeper and more profound level. The existential threat of meaningful change produces stress and anxiety over the loss of certainty and predictability, embedded in the developmental psychodynamics of attachment, separation, and loss, however illusory, imaginary, and fantasized, these expectations may have been. Next, the
concept of organizational learning and change is presented primarily through reference to the works of Argyris and Schon (1978) and secondarily found in the work of Peter Senge (1990).

**Repetition and Limited Learning: A Review of Argyris and Schon’s Theory of Organization Learning and Change**

Argyris and Schon (1978, 1996) and Senge (1990) view unproductive repetition and self-sealing processes as a consequence of faulty defensive reasoning and limited learning. In general, they view people as having a limited capacity to produce deep and profound change at the level of psychological and social structure. Limited learning is manifested in individual and organizational theories of action where vicious cycles of self-sealing processes and ineffective feedback loops create poor outcomes.

“Single-loop learning” (otherwise known as first-order processing) refers to this limited and unreflective capacity for individual and systemic change. Argyris et al. claim that limited learning and resistance to real change is governed by individual needs to avoid embarrassment and exposure as “incompetent” executives, managers, and workers. Organizational participants who work at this level of defensiveness become, in effect, incapable of surfacing errors and publicly testing privately held assumptions and attributions, which might make them anxious or threatened. Hence, the repetitive and self-sealing processes of single-loop learning and defensive behavior curtail participants’ ability to address interpersonal and organizational dysfunctions.

With single-loop learning, individuals are able to shift behavior and strategies to solve problems; however, they are not capable of questioning and altering values, norms, or (what Argyris and Schon call) their own “theories of action.” Theories of action are the combination of individual espoused theories and theories in use, what people say they do, on one hand, and what they actually do in practice, on the other. Single-loop learning reinforces defensive routines that unilaterally protect individuals from embarrassment and thereby block their public testing of assumptions and attributions that they hold privately in their heads. Frequently, espoused theories and theories in use are in contradiction, intentions do not match outcomes, and individuals are unaware of this conflict. Moreover, discussion or dialogue around the presence of such contradictions is unmentionable and considered taboo.
Deep change relies on minimal defensiveness, critical reflection in practice (double-loop or second-order learning processes), and the ability among organizational members to set and fully articulate problems. This hyperconsciousness involves surfacing and attending to governing values, norms, and theories of action, which often perpetuate deep and persistent problems and foster errors in the first place. Argyris and Schon define individuals’ capability for changing the status quo as the double loop of reflective practice in which the individual can fully admit to and articulate errors and problems, and subsequently invent and test solutions to these well-articulated problems. Such actions for Argyris et al. include changes in which individuals are able to question not simply their behavioral and strategic assumptions but also to question and alter their underlying norms, values, and theories of action. When pressed to answer the riddle of what makes the difference between those who can and those who cannot double-loop learn, Argyris et al. indicate that the difference rests with the degree to which individuals are motivated by competence and effectiveness. In addition, they indicate that double-loop learning does not come naturally to any of us, and therefore, it has to be learned and practiced through repetition.

In sum, proponents of organizational learning view resistance to change as “a vicious cycle of self-sealing behavior” (Argyris & Schon, 1978). One is reminded of the myth of Sisyphus and the meaningless and mindless task of pushing a rock up a mountain side (see Kets de Vries, 2007). Time has stalled. Time is irrelevant or nonexistent. As with unconsciousness and primary process thinking in psychoanalytic theory, time is a-temporal. Fragmented and repetitive psychological structures block reflectivity. Such defensive actions produce agents who are not cognizant of time or history. In the compulsion to repeat, routine and “rational” human actions are rendered automatic, unconscious, and ritualistic (Diamond, 1985). These repetitive actions at the surface of organized performance in modern organizations are frequently dysfunctional, inefficient, and maladaptive processes and structures. What I am calling the cognitive-behavioral approach to learning (individual and organizational) halts at the edge of explanation by its acknowledgment that limited learning is rooted in faulty reasoning and rationalizations (Argyris, 2004).

Organizational researchers and change practitioners would be well served by a theoretical framework and comprehensive theory of human personality that informs their understanding of the human compulsion to repeat and not to learn from experience. Such a theory should provide insight into the human tendency to engage in what appears at the surface to be worthless and futile, self-defeating, acts of repetition, and acts that reinforce the status quo with maladaptive strategies and structures. These compulsive practices have been
described from a cognitive-behavioral perspective as self-sealing processes of single-loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978) and from a psychoanalytic framework as indicative of ritualistic defenses (Diamond, 1985, 1993). Both perspectives encourage the acknowledgment of these defensive and dysfunctional, repetitive actions. The notion among theorists of organizational learning and change of promoting reflective practitioners makes it clear that consciousness and heightened awareness of how participants think and reason in their professional roles and practices is essential to moving beyond the vicious cycle of single-loop learning and the limitations of unproductive repetition. I submit it is insufficient to attend to these cognitive and behavioral processes without exploring the defensive psychological and emotional roots of the compulsion to repeat.

The Circularity of Compulsive Repetition: A Psychoanalytic Contribution to Organizational Change or the Psychodynamics of Single- and Double-Loop Learning

What Argyris and Schon (1978) refer to as single-loop learning and self-sealing practices, psychoanalytic theorists would describe as “repetition compulsion,” the phenomenon of automatically and unconsciously repeating actions, thoughts, and feelings. Freud (1914) originally referred to this compulsion to repeat among other things as evidence of a death instinct or destructive drive. Individuals seem to blindly repeat actions that reproduce painful outcomes. It is as if masochism were at play in these thoughtless, repetitive acts, acts that are self-defeating, punitive, and potentially harmful to the individual, group, and organization. In Freud’s metapsychological schema, one can imagine a punitive superego (conscience, “I-above”) directing the individual ego (“I”) in repetitive actions that evoke identical and predictably, nonthreatening results. This defensive maneuver of repetition compulsion signified an attempt on behalf of the individual (self/ego) to manage anxiety by repressing, forgetting, denying, and undoing the presence of the object, which stirred the anxiety in the first place. According to philosopher Jonathan Lear (2005), what Freud observes is compulsive repetitiveness. He writes, “Repetition is not the aim of the repetition, if there is an aim here it is to avoid facing up to the looming situation by inducing disruption and anxiety” (p. 160). In other words, the compulsion to repeat is inherently about avoiding the problem at hand. This was particularly true in the case of the police chief and his captains. They preferred to perpetuate the fantasized rationalization as explanation for their broken department by
stating how they were no different than any other police department and that police officers are juveniles. Continuing on with their unaltered daily routines meant they could operate as if nothing was wrong. This despite the fact that negative local news about the department and its officers occurred weekly, and city government demanded change and improvement in officer morale and performance.

Although originating in the clinical literature of individual psychology, evidence for compulsive repetitiveness has been documented in the move from individual to group level of analysis. For example, Bion (1959) depicted basic assumption groups of fight-flight, pairing, and dependency. Menzies’ (1960) classic empirical study of a nursing service of a general hospital portrayed social systems as a defense against and anxiety, Diamond (1984) described facets of “bureaucracy as externalized self-system,” and Kernberg (1998) explained bureaucratization as a defense against anxiety. Although intending to merely illustrate behaviors and strategies governed by individual reasoning, Argyris’ and Schon’s model of single-loop learning, self-sealing processes, and defensive routines depicted what psychoanalytic theorists call repetition compulsion (or the compulsion to repeat). Such actions are seemingly automatic and unconscious and, more pertinent to our discussion, shared among people in cooperative systems such as organizations.

The individual and group compulsion to repeat is innate to human nature. For individuals, groups, and organizations, repetitive actions are frequently unconscious and counterproductive. In a recent article titled “Between memory and destiny: Repetition,” psychoanalyst Norberto Carlos Marucco (2007) writes, “The analyst is then summoned to halt this circularity of repetition in which the subject loses himself” (p. 319). Transcending the vicious cycle of self-reinforcing feedback loops described in the organizational learning literature requires meaningful and proactive change in the form of intervention and disruption of individuals, groups, and organizations, operating automatically and unconsciously. In fact, individuals engaged in the compulsion to repeat lose self-consciousness and can even jeopardize their capacity as effective agents of action in the workplace. These repetitive cycles demand our attention in considering the psychodynamics of constructive organizational change.

**The Structure of Repetition**

In the discussion that follows, I explore the structure of repetitive processes in individuals, groups, and organizations with the aim toward better
understanding the psychodynamic processes of meaningful organizational change. I suggest that authentic and genuine change in organizations requires a conscious and persistent breaking up and undoing of unconscious repetitive structures in individuals, groups, and organizations, which is precisely the function of organizational diagnosis as a precursor to intervention strategies and practices (Diamond & Allcorn, 2009; Levinson, 1972, 2002).

Drawing from contemporary infancy and clinical research, attachment theory, neuroscience, and object relations theory, a paradigmatic shift occurs in psychoanalytic theories one that describes the individual as “object-seeking” and the self (substituting for concept of the ego) as processes of organizing one’s experience and shaping one’s perceptions and sense of self and other—a metaphorical self-organization. Memories and experiences of self are rooted in attachment and our earliest (infantile) internalizations of mothering and holding. Ultimately internal (self and other) object relations, as represented by organized experiences with significant others, shape individual perceptions of others and the nature and quality of shared emotions in the form of everyday transference and countertransference between members in the workplace.

A contemporary psychoanalytic approach defines organizations as relational and experiential systems. From this perspective, the workplace is viewed as a collision between social and psychological defensive structures (Diamond & Allcorn, 2009). One cannot fully understand an organization without interpreting the meaning and quality of interpersonal relationships and experience within. Thus, the intersubjective dynamics of transference and countertransference between individual members, leaders, and followers of the organization are central to understanding the nature of repetition and repetition compulsion in organizations. Without understanding through hours of interviewing, individuals and groups, and by observing everyday work routines and processes in the police department, we could not have simultaneously empathized with the officers on the street and chief and his captains in the office. This empathic understanding of two parties engaged in mutual self-destruction was critical to telling the story, breaking the compulsion to repeat, and promoting organizational change.

Repetition in Transference, Countertransference, Grief, and Mourning

Acknowledgment of the potency of feedback loops in organizational learning and change (Argyris, 1983) is fundamental in the role played by transference and countertransference dynamics. Proponents of organizational learning lack
a concept of transference and consequently cannot adequately or fully under-
stand the resistance and negative emotional reactions to individual attempts to
test fellow workers’ privately held assumptions and attributions.

In psychoanalytically oriented organizational research, it is acknowl-
edged that participants engage in transference and countertransference
dynamics with colleagues, managers, and executives as well as with
researchers/consultants. Transference and countertransference refers to the
emotional bonds between individuals, which unconsciously influence and
complicate relationships between supervisors and subordinates, executives
and staff, and coworkers. Transference in organizations describes the psy-
chodynamic processes in which individuals compulsively and repeatedly
transfer feelings rooted in childhood and earlier profound relationships onto
colleagues and supervisors in the present. Countertransference then describes
the unconscious and automatic emotional responses of others to the experi-
ence of transferred and displaced emotions directed onto them. Adult work-
ers unwittingly engage in child-like roles and relationships.

In the process of organizational diagnosis and feedback, participants’
frequently experience the telling of the organizational story with a sense of
recognition, validation, and confirmation on one hand and feelings of
shame, exposure, and incompetence on the other hand. Rather than simply
confirming the organizational researchers’ perceptions of the organizational
story, members may find themselves face to face with strange, repressed,
denied, and split-off parts of themselves. Beneath the surface, members are
confronted by the subjective and objective (internal and external) realities
of their past performances as forms of acting out repetitively and automati-
cally (transference and countertransference), patterns of interpersonal
relations that were at times contrary to their well-being, and frequently
destructive, and often counterproductive of tasks, missions, and responsi-
bilities (Diamond, 1985, 1993).

According to Freud (1914),

We soon realize that transference is itself merely an instance of repeti-
tion, and that this transference involves repetition of the forgotten past
[italics added] not only onto the physician, but onto all other areas of
the patient’s current situation. We must therefore expect that the patient
will yield to the compulsion to repeat—which now takes the place of
the impulse to remember—not only in his personal relationship to the
physician, but in all other activities and relationships taking place in
his life at the same time; for example, if during the course of treatment
he chooses a love-object, takes some task upon himself in a project of
any sort. The greater the resistance, the more thoroughly remembering will be replaced by acting out (repetition). (1914/2006, p. 395)

For Freud, resistance to change is about acting out, and acting out takes on an automatic and unconscious repetitive form for the individual in that it shapes the character of transference and, therefore, of primary relationships. In his book *Freud*, philosopher Jonathan Lear writes, “transference, then, is a repetition that cannot (yet) be remembered in the right sort of way” (p. 136). Without cognizance of their history, police officers and their superiors acted out toward each other in repetitive patterns that shaped and reinforced their regressive and child-like experiences of one another—officers perceived as disobedient children, whereas the chief and his captains were perceived as dismissive and uncaring parents.

To break this vicious cycle of destructive repetition and self-sealing behavior would require a process change that acknowledged emotional loss and the necessary capacity to mourn that loss. Profound change is ultimately a process of consciously letting go of old routines and repetitions and simultaneously internalizing new and alternative practices. In the case of the police department, this would require a narrative mediation of sorts across the organizational boundary between the two parties to the conflict. This alternative narrative would emerge from the acceptance and confirmation by the chief, captains, and officers of an organizational diagnosis that told the story of a police department unwittingly stuck in unproductive repetition and the compulsion to repeat.

Thus far, it has been argued that repetitions are inevitable in the emotional attachments of individual and organizational life—colored and shaped by the emotional knot of transference and countertransference dynamics. It is incumbent to sort out the nature of these repetitions. Hans Loewald provides a helpful distinction between productive and counterproductive repetition.

**A Note on Passive and Active Repetition**

In distinguishing repetition from repetition compulsion, Hans Loewald writes that there are two forms of repetition in human life: repeating by action, otherwise known as “acting out,” and repeating in what he called the “psychical field” otherwise known as the mind (cognitions and emotions). Loewald (1971) writes, “Acting out is a concept strictly related to the concept of reproduction in the psychical field; i.e. acting out is an alternative to remembering in the narrow sense” (p. 59). One might think of this as the process of undoing painful memories as with trauma. When considering
repetitive acts, Loewald provides a useful and insightful difference between what he calls passive and unconscious reproduction, and active and conscious recreation. Paradoxically, for Loewald, reproduction and recreation are not only oppositional forces. They are complementary actions as well. Thus, we ought to think of them as two sides of the same phenomenon, parts of the whole gestalt, the former as defensive repetition, often manifest in a form of “acting out,” and the latter as nondefensive repetition, manifest in a form of awareness and reflective practice.

Action in the outer world can be understood as acting out only insofar as it is seen as taking place instead of repetition in the psychic field. If such action occurs as the external manifestation of or as the result of psychic recreation, then it is not acting out but recreative repetition in the external arena. (Loewald, 1971, p. 60)

Lear describes passive repetition as “imagination trapped in unfreedom.” Paranoid-schizoid modes of experience, manifested by polarized and coercive relational dynamics of psychological splitting and projective identification, predominate (Klein, 1959; Ogden, 1989). As a schizoid organization, the police department was polarized and psychological split into an “us and them” structure. Consequently, officers projected aggression onto the chief and his captains and vice versa, resulting in both parties to the conflict identifying with the others projection.

Active repetition is the capacity to face the future or “the possibility of new possibilities” (2005). Table 1 is my attempt to clarify the dissimilarity between passive and active repetition. In so doing, it describes the unconscious and a-historical characteristics of passive reproductive repetition as reinforcing through paranoid and schizoid modes of experience, emotional and cognitive (ego or self) disorganization, and defensive and compulsive interpersonal and organizational dynamics. On observation, these dynamics appear to be destructive and indicative of what Freud called the death instinct or destructive drive.

In contrast to passive repetition, active repetition requires historical awareness and self-consciousness, reinforcing self- and ego-organization. As with Melanie Klein’s and Thomas Ogden’s relational, integrative and reparative, description of depressive modes of experience, actions are grounded in reality and making contact with others as opposed to the splitting and fragmentation of self and other. Repetition is intentional and reflective, supportive of deeper learning and change. On observation, these interpersonal and organizational dynamics appear to be constructive and illustrative of Freud’s conceptual tension between life and death instincts (see Freud, 1920).
As stated at the beginning, repetition is a normal and inescapable social and psychological phenomenon. Beyond the so-called malady of repetition compulsion, psychologically, repetition is essential to the development of ego mastery; it is a crucial ego function in that it supports the establishment of self-confidence and competence. Recreative repetition is an essential dimension behind reflective practice and professional success. It requires active repetitive practice that supports (second-order) double-loop learning. Organizationally, active repetition is central to building effective systems. It is essential to designing effective and efficient work flow, rational and reasonable divisions of labor, structures of accountability, task specialization, delegations of responsibility with authority, role clarity, and the matching of intentions with outcomes. Of course, in many bureaucratic institutions, reproductive and passive repetition produces structural and operational dysfunction, goal displacement, limited learning from experience, and minimal reflectivity in practice. This was certainly the case with the police department as described above. Awareness of an organizational story and, for instance, thematic patterns of managerial responses to critical incidents, is essential to real change. Numerous critical incidents were articulated by officers and superiors of the police department and were then presented in the narrative organizational diagnosis. With confirmation of the narrative, the police department could confront the nature of its collective passive repetition and socially construct a more productive and proactive pattern of relationships and work flow.

Table 1. Passive and Active Repetition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passive reproductive repetition</th>
<th>Active recreative repetition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unconscious</td>
<td>Conscious</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-historical</td>
<td>Historical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego disorganization</td>
<td>Ego organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schizoid or fragmented psychic structure</td>
<td>Integrated structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paranoid–schizoid mode of experience</td>
<td>Depressive mode of experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primitive defenses such as psychological splitting and projective identification</td>
<td>More mature defenses such as rationalization and humor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partial gestalt</td>
<td>Whole gestalt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsion neurosis</td>
<td>Intentional and reflective practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death drive</td>
<td>Eros and libidinal drive</td>
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Organizational Stories: Narrative Themes and Repetitive Structures

Psychoanalytically oriented organizational consultations involve the construction of organizational stories (narrative) from organizing collected data (factual, historical, narrative, and experiential) into repetitive patterns, themes, and points of urgency (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1987). These coproduced (with organizational members) narratives, if shaped by empathy and introspection, embody “listening deeply” to groups and individuals (Stein, 1994) and, if woven out of repetitive themes, signify organizational identity or the organization in mind (Diamond, 1993).

Rooted in organizational stories told by organizational researchers and consultants and shaped by transference and countertransference dynamics between key players, organizational change interventions can expose these a-historical and nonreflective, unconscious, vicious cycles of self-destructive repetition.

Central to the method of organizational diagnoses is the process of constructing organizational stories (narrative) by arranging data collected (factual, historical, narrative, and experiential) into repetitive patterns, themes, and points of urgency. (Diamond, 2008, p. 358)

The organizational story as told by the researchers/consultants often triggers the processes and experiences of emotional loss and mourning. Participants come face-to-face with the reality of inevitable change and the grief associated with letting go of familiar and comforting old attachments to rituals and routines such as the emotional knots of transference and countertransference dynamics. When confirmed by participants, the presentation of the organizational story activates resonance and a deeper understanding of the link between unconscious actions, repetition, and reinforcing the status quo. A sense of responsibility and ownership of the present dilemma is more forthcoming.

Frequently, the collective history and critical moments in the life of an organization and its members are suppressed and taken for granted. These memories are often displaced by a sense of the most immediate and concrete problems of the moment and thereby rendered unconscious. Routinely, organizational members rationalize that reflecting on the past is “a waste of time” and “irrelevant to the business at hand.” These groups are stuck in regressive positions where primitive, first-order cognitive processing and thinking tends to be siloed, fragmented, and a-historical. Thus, as noted above, the model, method,
and process of organizational diagnosis and change are designed and intended to elicit historical and narrative data organized around crises and critical incidents of the past. Psychoanalytic organizational researchers and consultants expose the hidden relational dynamics behind the superficiality of everyday work life, resulting in an organizational narrative that is “telling them what they know” (Diamond, 2008), or as Freud’s patients’ are reported to have said in one form or another: “Oh, I knew that I just hadn’t thought of it.”

In organizational diagnosis, researchers and consultants reach a critical phase in the processes of organizational change when they share feedback (organizational story) with participants who may experience the telling of the organizational story with mixed and often conflicting emotions (Diamond, 2008). By this point in organizational assessment, ideally, consultants have established good enough trust and empathy through positive transference and countertransference. Once the organizational story is conveyed and confirmed by participants, consultants can constructively confront participants’ espoused confirmation of the organizational story by encouraging them to consider why the intervention was necessary to address these particular issues, problems, themes, and points of urgency. In a manner that normalizes defensive human conduct as an ordinary yet counterproductive practice in everyday life, the consultants can ask participants to consider the extent of their suppression and denial of individual and collective pain and suffering, which results in fragmenting groups and organizations creating antagonistic camps and victims such as in the case of the police department. Consultants can further ask participants to consider how their routine defenses against this knowledge and self-awareness of injuries and losses of self and self-integrity work for them and against them simultaneously. The social and psychological value of constructive confrontation is in the promotion of claimed actions and responsibility. Because change is not immediate and takes practice, consultants have to follow up with participants with an on-site intervention that enables participant-observations and the potential with proactive interventions to illustrate defenses in real time and in participants’ routine daily operations. “There it is. Do you see it? Can you claim it?” In his book *Freud*, Lear (2005) writes,

> Psychoanalysis itself is a building up of a practical-cognitive skill of recognizing the fractal nature of one’s unconscious conflicts as they are unfolding in the here and now—and of intervening in ways that make a satisfying difference. (p. 52)

Conscious and external acknowledgment on behalf of clients is an important step in the process of change, but it does not necessarily reflect
deeper understanding of patterns and shapes of organized experience that are rendered unconscious and part and parcel of the intersubjective life of organization (organizational identity). The psychoanalytically oriented consultant is forever skeptical of the depth of change based on his or her awareness of unconscious processes and that ritualistic nature of repetition compulsion and acting out. For despite the clients’ acknowledgment and agreement with the narrative content of the organizational story, without the capacity to reflect on their actions and practices over time, and without the capacity to observe and experience these patterns and repetitions in the moment, they will not come to understand the emotional shape and nature of their collective past and its impact on their present and the moment to moment routines of their work life. Later in the same article cited above Freud (1914/2006) writes,

> It is now quite plain to us that the start of a patient’s analysis does not mean the end of his illness, and that we need to treat the illness not as a matter belonging to the past but as a force operating in the present. (p. 396)

**Process Consultation, Interrupting the Compulsion to Repeat, and Organizational Change**

Similarly, organizational change is dynamic. While organizational diagnosis comprises historical and narrative data, *interventions open up systems to themselves enabling the possibility of learning from reflection*. For example, in process consultation (Schein, 1999), consultants attend to the organizational dynamics in the here and now in ways that exhibit and confirm historical patterns and institutionalized defensive routines for organizational participants. Interventions such as process consultation are intended to raise the level of awareness in individuals, groups, and organizations about defensive routines stemming from transference dynamics that inhibit participants’ capacity to learn and make effective changes. Even the most successful of consultations do not leave the organization radically transformed from dysfunctional to functional or from failing to succeeding. Rather, more often such interventions assist participants in detecting, intervening, and interrupting repetitive and self-sealing processes in their organizations before they get completely out of hand.
Ultimately, it is the degree of enhanced awareness, and consciousness, and the capacity to change and to intervene based on what participants know from their emotional attachments, collective history, and culture that makes a difference. Awareness of the passive reproductive repetition is possible as clients become more attuned to the signals of unconscious processes taking over the management of organization. Nevertheless, the human nature of repetition compulsion does not disappear, it is rather better known, thought of, and periodically worked through.

If we think of the concept of working through in its broadest context, it seems to me to be nothing other than the process in which the human psyche is reoriented toward, habituated into, happiness and freedom. I do not mean any particular moment of joy, but the conditions in which a human can flourish. When in analysis we see an analysand locked in repetition, we thereby see an imagination trapped in unfreedom. Working through is precisely the process by which the analysand’s imagination is opened up for new possibilities. This possibility for new possibilities is precisely what it is to face the future creatively. (Lear, 2007, p. 304)

In the case of the police department, officers and their superiors felt stuck and could not imagine their way out of the entrapment. Intervention that addresses the compulsion to repeat embedded within transference dynamics between participants is crucial to breaking up the repetitive cycle of self-sealing behavior described by mainstream organization theorists and organization development practitioners such as Argyris and Schon. It is central that organizational diagnoses tell the story of repetitive themes and passive reproductive repetitions at work. For example, if masked in rationality, whole policies and programs may be produced by work groups with little consciousness and reflectivity. Self-sealing processes are nonreflective and unconscious, passive reproductions.

Many organizations are careening out of control and away from the public values and interests of serving the public and social good. Confronting unproductive and destructive repetitions and resistance to organizational change is challenging but essential. In fact, it is analogous to the process of working through described by Lear via Freud. In this article, it is argued that real organizational change requires working through and breaking away from compulsive and repetitive cycles of passive reproductions that are unconsciously relied on by participants to abate workplace anxiety. Such change demands
conscious activity and empowerment among organizational participants, and a grip on repetition in the form of active recreations. Paying attention to compulsive repetitions embedded in the capacity for organizational learning is essential to overcoming resistance to change. If deeper and more profound change in the status quo is sought after, then psychoanalytic method and process for organizational diagnosis, intervention, and change offers considerable advantages. This framework treats organizations as experiential and relational. Real change requires altering intersubjective structures and working relationships, and productive recreations.

In this article, I have proposed that a central feature of resistance to organizational learning and change is located in the passive reproductions of individual, interpersonal, and systemic compulsions to repeat and their concomitant social and psychological structures and processes of organization. Profound change in the status quo demands a confrontation with human nature and, therefore, with the social and psychological compulsion to repeat.

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Notes
1. Names, identities, and particular details of the case are changed and/or excluded to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the department. Any resemblance with a particular case is coincidental as this narrative is a representation of several different consultations, thematically similar, combined.
2. Transference and countertransference: the former refers to an individual’s unconscious displacement of emotions from childhood attachments in the past onto someone in present, and the latter, refers to the other’s unconscious experience and possibly reaction to the individual’s original transference of emotions.
3. Notions of grief and mourning are critical to our understanding the emotional processes of change, particularly when change is understood as the breaking of an attachment.
4. Concepts such as internalization, externalization, introjections, and projections are derived from psychoanalytic object relations theory and generally refer to the infantile and primitive psychological processes of taking in, holding onto, and expelling out good and bad affects derived from primary maternal tendency.
of the self to hold onto good affects and images while rejecting bad affects and images. These are primitive defensive maneuvers that carry forward from infancy into adulthood.

5. See Jonathan Lear’s (2005) use of the concept of “primordial struggle” in his book, *Freud* in which he uses the term in describing “structures of repetition” in the “compulsion to repeat.”

6. Object seeking in the contemporary psychoanalytic literature of object relations refers to the individual motivation to relate and to form attachments with others.

7. Paranoid–schizoid modes of experience were first described by Melanie Klein as the initial position of the infant in relation to the mother. This concept later came to describe the infantile roots of adulthood characterized by fragmented thinking (part objects), projected aggression, and what is called projective identification in which the individual projects unwanted parts of himself or herself onto the other, and experiences them vicariously through the other.

8. Ego mastery here refers to self-integration and finding emotional balance between the forces of conscience and impulses of aggression and sexuality.

9. What I am calling “real organizational change” refers to changing psychological and social (organizational) structures. This implies a genuine break from unconscious and automatic patterns of behavior and reactions to events. Cognitive psychologists might label such deep change as double-loop learning, whereas psychoanalysts see it as represented by reparation, integration, and true self. My emphasis on identifying and overcoming the compulsion to repeat is intended to emphasize that dimension of real change that requires heightened awareness and reflectivity, which enables individuals through heightened awareness to minimize and overcome the tendency to engage in psychological splitting. Such forms of defensive routines are counterproductive and destructive to self and others.

10. See Loewald’s 1971 article on repetition for an introduction to these concepts of productive recreation and passive reproduction.

**References**


**Bio**

**Michael A. Diamond** is professor of public affairs, director of the Center for the Study of Organizational Change at the Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri. He received his PhD in government and politics (political theory, organizational behavior, political psychology) from the University of Maryland, College Park, in 1981. He currently teaches graduate (MPA and PhD) courses in organizational analysis and change, organization studies, logics of inquiry, and the group psychology of terrorism. His more than 30 years of writing and research is focused on the nexus of psychoanalysis, organizational politics, and culture. He was awarded the 1994 Harry Levinson Award for Excellence in Consulting Psychology from the American Psychological Association, the 1999 William T. Kemper Fellow for Excellence in Teaching, and the 2005 Faculty-Alumni Award from the University of Missouri. He has published more than 50 journal articles and 4 books. His article (2008) “Telling Them What They Know: Organizational Change, Defensive Resistance, and the Unthought Known” is published in *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 44*(3), 348-364. His latest (2009) book (with Seth Allcorn) is titled *Private Selves in Public Organizations*, New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan. He is a practicing organizational consultant with 30 years of experience. He has consulted with public, private, and nonprofit organizations, including several Fortune 100 companies. He was the coeditor-in-chief of the *American Review of Public Administration* and was on the editorial boards of *Administration & Society; Psychoanalysis, Culture, & Society;* and *Organisational and Social Dynamics*. He was former president and is one of the founding members of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations.