

**Finding Our Balance:
Reflections on Thinking, Knowing, and Doing in ISPSO**

Rose Redding Mersky

Presented at the

26th ISPSO Annual Meeting 22–28 June, 2009, Toledo, Spain

Symposium: Differences at Work: Towards Integration and Containment



Diego Velázquez – Las Meninas (1656)

This paper is a work in progress, much like what is represented in this Velázquez painting, *Las Meninas*, which hangs at the Prado.

Here we have the artist in the process of painting the princess, while reflected in the mirror are the anxious king and queen and in the forefront are the dwarves and other mis-fits brought in to amuse the young royal, so that she will submit to having her portrait painted yet again. Her ladies-in-waiting, known by the Portuguese name “meninas”, are doing their best to cajole her.

Velázquez was inspired by the recently published *Don Quixote*, and this painting was his attempt to call into question the prevailing notion that a

firm hierarchy was in the best interests of contemporary society. He has turned the scale topsy turvy by giving more prominence to Princess Margarita and her ladies in waiting than to the royal couple and even greater importance to the dwarfs and to the dog by placing them in the forefront. He imbued them all with a sense of dignity and individual worth usually reserved for persons of distinction.

I hope that what I am about to offer can be seen in the same spirit, in the sense that we may have developed a firm hierarchy of thinking that has impeded our ability to think new thoughts and that what might be called for now is a better balance.

Part I. Precipitating Experience – Philadelphia, 2008

The experience that crystallized this paper occurred at the last parallel session of last year's ISPSO symposium in Philadelphia. The presenter, William Kahn, was an invited guest, a noted professor and consultant, who had recently authored a well-known book. At least 30 people attended, including many prominent ISPSO members.

The presenter detailed what he termed a 'failed consultation' to a hospital where a well-known surgeon had mistakenly removed the wrong organ in an operation. The presenter was called in as a consultant and correctly diagnosed that this was a systemic issue, and his clear presentation detailed what followed.

The discussion and questions following the presentation focused mostly on suggestions for how the consultation might have been done differently, and reflected the view that looking at the systematic issues would require special skills on the part of the consultant. But my mind was going in a different direction – I just couldn't understand how a surgeon could make this kind of major mistake and get off with the small punishment he received.

Having difficulty getting my question aired, I interrupted a colleague who had just been called upon (my apologies) to ask: "What was the reaction to the fact that the surgeon was not sufficiently reprimanded or punished for his mistake? After all, he did the cutting."

To my surprise, I found myself under attack from both my right and left: "You're scapegoating. You don't understand systems dynamics. It's a

systems perspective; don't you know that?" To my right was an ISPSO colleague of long standing who was looking at me red-faced and angry.

I felt embarrassed, humiliated and furious all at once. And completely puzzled by this state of affairs....

Before and after this took place, there was a lively discussion taking place on my North-South axis between two esteemed senior ISPSO members, regarding the value of a particular methodology pioneered by one of them. One expressed his reservations about the methodology, while, on the other hand, its pioneer defended it. I later learned that this had been a long-running disagreement, but it was the first time I had heard it.

I pondered both the session and my own difficult experience for weeks following the symposium. In a sense, like *Las Meninas*, this session was a "topsy-turvy" one. The expert presenter was presenting a failure in consulting to an audience that took the role of consulting to him, in the role of knowing. The expert audience, however, somehow lost its way in its fierce competition to offer advice, to silence unwelcome ideas and to activate a debate over good and bad methodology.

I wondered whether debating whether a methodology is right or wrong, whether a consultation is successful or failed and whether it is "permissible" in ISPSO to approach a case with more than one perspective pointed to the deeper question of whether ISPSO, instead of facilitating a capacity to think, was somehow becoming a debating society, where right was right and wrong was wrong, and it was just a matter of knowing the score.

Part II: How do I communicate to the ISPSO community?

As difficult as this experience was, I began to link it with other thoughts that I had been having about the organization. Gradually, I began to believe that this experience contained a kernel of something that might be important for us and for ISPSO. The question was how I could communicate it.

I felt supported and encouraged to put my experience into words by two important precedents: Susan Long's paper on Quality (discussed at the 2006 Harlem Members' Day) and Stan Gold's paper entitled "The Sterile Organization", presented at last year's symposium. Both of these papers

were thoughtful efforts to articulate issues of importance to ISPSO as an organization.

I began to develop the following set of questions:

What is the relationship between knowing and thinking? Does knowing something in a certain way allow the possibility of integrating new thinking in relation to that knowing OR is new thinking experienced as a threat?

What might be the defensive purpose of “knowing”? Is it necessary that we all “know” in the same way?

What may be the internal and external pressures on our system that has, inadvertently, influenced us to seek cohesion instead of tolerating differences, knowing rather than confusion and ‘not-knowing’, praxis based on popular approaches rather than experiment and new learning (and sometimes failure)?

Part III: The development of a working hypothesis

My first working hypothesis came to my mind very shortly after last year’s symposium. It posited that there exists in ISPSO a collusion between generations, i.e. it is agreed that the older and founding generation have done all of the thinking and it is the role of the younger generation to apply it as successful consultants, professors, authors and researchers. In this unconscious “deal”, the upcoming generation does not challenge the thinking of the older (all the thinking has been done!) in exchange for being made to feel special by the older generation’s eager acceptance of various invitations to speak, co-collaborate and work together.

While this resonated deeply with me, I found it wanting, in that it, in essence, pointed the finger at sub-groups, rather than taking a look at the system as a whole, and how all of us contribute to this collusion.

So I thought more and more about the question of what was at stake in our system. How could one think about this possible dynamic between generations in the context of our task, our history, and our current state? For example, at this stage I was giving a lot of thought to the possible significance of reaching age 25. Gradually, my thinking evolved to the following hypothesis (which appeared in the abstract written in February):

The primary task of ISPSO has transitioned from the development of new thinking to sustaining our success as a mature organization. In order to succeed at this, we have colluded in developing cohesion as to who we are, who is good and who is not, what is known and what is good praxis. In the meantime, new thinking (and sometimes thinking based on other psychoanalytic perspectives) is often found to be inconvenient and established thinking (and thinkers) are either deified or denigrated. Additionally, it is difficult for younger thinkers to find their authority and to gain traction. We are somehow bound together by our allegiances to one another and to our collective view of ISPSO. To protect and to promote the whole, we deify designated stars, commodify our knowledge and, in the process, limit our capacity to creatively think in new ways.

Part IV: Organizational examples: roles for authorizing new thinkers

As I have developed these questions and pondered my experience in Philadelphia, I thought about many aspects of ISPSO that potentially either influenced or reflected this direction. My idea for this presentation was to offer you these thoughts and not pound you with various bits of “proof” as to their legitimacy. I leave it to you to make your own associations to these ideas.

I have, however, found myself lately preoccupied with one part of this hypothesis that appears to me to relate to institutional processes, and so I wish briefly to talk about that. This part is the sentence from my hypothesis: *it is difficult for younger thinkers to find their authority and to gain traction.*

Stated baldly, it is my belief that, as an organization, we have colluded to remove legitimate means by which younger thinkers can gain the experience and the confidence to contribute to the thinking in our field. I would like to cite two institutional decisions made during our history that have contributed to this: the elimination of the role of discussant and opening the membership to anyone who is interested in joining the organization.

The discussant role

The role of discussant of plenary presented papers was standard for all symposia before we began parallel sessions (1995; London). For each paper accepted, another ISPSO member would be asked to be a discussant of such paper. The discussant’s task was to read the paper in advance and to develop

a thoughtful response to its content and to present these thoughts after the paper itself was presented.

Often (but not always) the chosen member was a newer or younger thinker. I myself was twice invited to take such a role. These two experiences were ground breaking for me, because they gave me a chance to articulate my thinking, without having to defend a paper. I was free to draw on my growing insights and to find a voice in the system.

When this role was taken up constructively, the discussant was able to help the audience better understand and integrate the content of the paper, as it was a first digestion on behalf of the whole. Often the discussant would share in advance with the author his or her thoughts. Unfortunately, the role was not always constructively taken up, and it was sometimes used to attack the presenter.

As I remember it, the decision to replace the role of discussant with the role of “moderator” or “convener” was made in preparation for the 1998 symposium in Jerusalem. I was president at the time and participated in this process. The idea was to soften the role and to make it more supportive of the presenter. It was created in the spirit of helping to facilitate the presentation.

At the time, the decision seemed an appropriate response to a “social” problem in the organization. However, it had the unintended consequence of removing a “thinking” role for newer members, who might not be ready to present a paper or who were still establishing for themselves and our community an intellectual trail.

Without this transitional role, newer members are now forced to step directly into the role of paper presenter, often creating tremendous stress on them. Meanwhile, the convener role, which is often no more than that of a host, is often assigned to younger and newer members.

Open membership

The decision in 2004 to open membership into the society has led to many consequences for the organization. Both Susan Long (2006) and Stan Gold (2008), in the papers I cited earlier, have written about its effect on the sense of our organization as a whole. But I wish to comment on another, again unintended, consequence of this policy.

Hitherto, anyone seeking membership in ISPSO was required to get a letter of recommendation from an existing member. This requirement was onerous, not just because of the letter, but because it meant that a detailed process of application must take place in order to become an ISPSO member. This was time-consuming and often created significant professional dilemmas for board members, who were responsible for voting on who would be accepted.

One advantage, however, of this earlier policy was that new members entered with the endorsement of an existing member, or, one could say, with a sense of legitimacy as a thinker. By being pre-approved, one entered the organization identified as a future intellectual contributor, rather than just an interested party.

These two changes – from discussant to convener and from recommended membership to open membership – have, I believe, very much limited the opportunities for new members to take legitimate and potentially equal roles as thinkers. It is as if we, as an organization, wanted to forget all the struggles and failures of our own development as learners in this field.

Over the years, new members and potential new members have told me that it is difficult for them to find their way into ISPSO. Many have observed that ISPSO seems to be in the control of established cliques. These perspectives seem to me to reflect not just a social question. They are, perhaps, equally, if not more, related to the lack of meaningful roles for establishing their intellectual voices. Our continual best efforts to welcome them often seem to flounder, perhaps because we have not institutionally given them a place.

What roles are there for upcoming members? As I see it, the roles are mostly administrative, i.e. moderating a paper, organizing a regional meeting and – in special cases – chairing a symposium or a professional development program. They are roles primarily of “doing” and not “thinking”. Those members who take the symposium and PD roles are very often from the ranks of the next generation of thinkers. They are always, at the same time, extremely successful professionals in their own right. These roles require an unbelievable amount of work and coordination and, those who take them, so often operating on their own, are open to a great deal of criticism (witness this year’s symposium situation).

Very often, after chairing such a meeting, these chairs drop out of the organization. So far as I know, we have not reached out in any coordinated way to these previous chairs to ask them about their experience or to welcome them back. They become, in a sense, a kind of ISPSO casualty.

While the role of symposium and PD chair may initially be seen as an attractive way to gain one's reputation in ISPSO, very often the opposite occurs. Pressure from the organization to run a successful and profitable event creates a natural tendency to steer away from risky program choices. Without a secure stature in ISPSO, the safest bet is to invite the famous people, who will draw participants. The chair, him or herself, working directly with the president, may feel legitimized by association to this role holder, thus reinforcing the collusion.

By the way, I am not suggesting that there are not many new thinkers emerging in ISPSO, only that – from my observation – they must find ways to establish themselves outside of ISPSO, rather than from within our organization.

This seems to me to be a disappointing direction for an organization that was originally founded by like-minded professionals seeking mutual support and learning.

Part V: 3 Hypotheses about ISPSO Social Defenses

Once I had developed my second hypothesis, I found myself wanting to explore more deeply. I began to ask the question, what possible social defenses lie behind this present reality of imbalance in ISPSO? As we know, organizations develop social defense systems in order to provide escape from the overwhelming anxiety of the primary task (see Menzies 1990). Assuming (as I do) that the primary task of ISPSO is to develop new thinking in this field, then, I asked myself, what could be the source or sources of anxiety about that task?

I would like to share three, fairly primitive, working hypotheses on this topic, which I hope will, in turn, lead to further thoughts from you.

Hypothesis #1 – Internal to ISPSO

This hypothesis is related to the fact that our founders are nearing retirement and soon we will have to face their loss. All of them, without exception, have contributed in a major way to our profession and to our thinking. We have honored our founders in many ways, although, strangely the origins of ISPSO – when it occurred, who actually is a founder, etc. – still remain murky and unclear. There are still various versions as to who actually were the founders and, it is not described, for example, on our web site.

My hypothesis is that we have a collective anxiety regarding the immanent loss of our founders. There is a sense that only with them would ISPSO have achieved its 25th year (and just to be sure of this, a founder was our president at that time). By colluding to avoid thinking, we “protect” our founders and keep them ever with us. But, on the other hand, by not wanting to destroy these founders by pushing them out (intellectually or otherwise), we are, at the same time, leaving ourselves with nothing to follow (except our own unworthy selves).

Hypothesis #2: Our organization in this field

The history of psychoanalysis is replete with splits. As new thinking threatened the founders, new schools of thought split off. Intermixed with these intellectual splits were intensive personal conflicts. Psychoanalytic institutes seem often to replicate this pattern (see Kirsner 2002). My hypothesis here is that there is anxiety that we will follow this pattern – that significant new thinking will not be able to be integrated into the collectively favored perspective, leading to an uncontrollable internal split and the development of other organizations that will both compete with ISPSO and dilute its intellectual authority. In other words, we will self-destruct.

Hypothesis #3: The Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations as a field of study

This is a “wild” hypothesis, so to say, which is that there is an unconscious anxiety that all that can be thought has already been thought in our field. We protect ourselves from this anxiety by colluding in a system that does not take the risk of failing to develop new thoughts, i.e. our current state of affairs.

I have found support for this hypothesis from a paper entitled “Problems of Collegial Learning in Psychoanalysis: Narcissism and Curiosity” by Warren S. Poland, which will be presented at the International Psychoanalytic Association conference in July. He writes:

“...as we mature, so does our scientific field. While psychoanalysis continues to grow, new growth no longer has the wondrous revolutionary grandeur brought forth by our early pioneers. That grandeur may be part of what first attracted us to this field, but now our field is different in both quality and quantity. Freud opened to us a new ocean. Neither we nor our work is diminished by our exploring the multiple rivers that lead from that common sea.”

Perhaps we feel diminished and therefore anxious about the prospect of developing thinking in the wake of what has been opened for us by our founders.

As an experience of humiliation at last year’s symposium ultimately led to the development of this paper, I have started to explore the link between this core feeling and my three social defense hypotheses. For example, would it humiliate the founders and best thinkers to have to face their ideas being not just built upon but challenged by the younger generation? Are we as an organization colluding to keep younger thinkers from experiencing the humiliation of facing how much they don’t know by slotting them into roles that they can do well, but don’t allow them to offer their thinking. In what way is experiencing humiliation of one’s own intellectual limitations part of one’s development as a thinker? And, in somehow, hoping to protect people from feeling humiliated, have we colluded in the ways I am suggesting?

Conclusion:

I would like to close by bringing us back to the Velazquez painting.



As I mentioned earlier, Velasquez, the painter, appears in this painting, as do I, the author, appear in this paper. It has been a risky and difficult proposition to offer an academic paper that springs from a direct experience of my own. Even as I have developed it and been in contact with others during the process, like the participant/observer, it has not always been clear to me how much of what I am saying is influenced by personal feelings and how much is recognizably important to the organization. All I can do is offer it to you for your reflections and insights.

I would, however, like to close with this thought from Warren Poland's soon to be delivered paper:

New learning modifies prior understanding as it is incorporated into the collective body of analytic knowledge, and a multiplicity of understandings replaces the clarity of an individual voice with the rich counterpoints of a choral symphony.

I look forward to hearing your music.

Bibliography:

Gold, S. (2008). The Sterile Organization. Parallel presentation at the ISPSO symposium in Philadelphia, PA. June, 2008

Long, S. (2006) ISPSO: Issues of Quality. Presented for discussion at ISPSO Members' Day, Haarlem, The Netherlands, June, 2006

Menzies-Lythe, I. (1990) Institutional Consultancy as a Means of Bringing about change in individuals. In Sievers, ed. Contributions from the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations 1983-2008.

Kirsner, D. (2000) Unfree Associations: Inside *Psychoanalytic* Institutes. London: Process Press, 2000.

Poland, W.S. (2009) Problems of Collegial Learning in Psychoanalysis: Narcissism and Curiosity. To be presented at the 46th annual International Psychoanalytic Association conference, July 27 to August 1, Chicago.