

The dynamic of “scapegoating”: mobbing, bullying and casting out

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Summary

Background: the group dynamics called “scapegoat” is quite common above all among working groups.

Objectives: within the broader dynamics of “mobbing” and “bossing” it consists in isolating the weaker member of a group, exposing him/her to persistent criticism and marginalization and eventually expelling him/her from the group.

Methods: studies brought out the fact that the groups where “scapegoats” can more easily be noted are the ones that the psychologist W.Bion judges distinguished by “the assumption” of the fight’.

Results: for a better functioning of a working group leader should constantly monitor the state of tension also deep and unconscious that cross the group in order to avoid that it is generated within this phenomenon.

Conclusions: the leader who proposes to avoid the emergence of this phenomenon must be able to master and use in the manner best techniques and tools of relational communication and inter-group.

KEY WORDS: scapegoat, conformism, casting out, isolation, mobbing, bullying, group.

Background

In “The Authoritarian Personality” (1) the sociologist Theodor W. Adorno analyzes individual behaviours and attitudes characterized by rigidity, conventionality, prejudices, and indicates how those behaviours define the clinical description of paranoid, dominant and tyrannical personality. In his reasoning these behaviours are conveyed and imposed by the leaders to the other members of the group, the majority, shaping for the same group an internal group structure characterized by psychological dependence subjection. Thus every social group has its own particular perception of what the norm is and what diversity is. In “Massenpsychologie des Faschismus” (2) he analyzes the so called “character armour”. According to it individuals tend to protect themselves against stress adopting behavioural patterns identifiable with: conventionality, emotional distance, anaffectivity, aggression. According to Leavitt (3), every group generates centripetal forces union and identification, as well as centrifugal forces from which individual differences emerge. Though admitting that each member, even in the general tendency to conventionality, maintains his own individual identity, we must affirm that there is no group without a force driving to conformism and acceptance of the way of thinking, behaviour, habits and values, accepted by all.

The group, any group, is organized on this pattern so that the isolation of the member, too different to be tolerated by most, is a recurring phenomenon. The scapegoat dynamic often appears in the groups, even the ones which differ for the characteristics of the members and the quality of internal structures (4).

Formerly the scapegoat was a goat left in the desert or in the woods, as part of Jewish ceremonies for Yom Kippur. This rite is described in The Bible and The Talmud. In the Temple the priest (putting his hands on the goat’s head) remitted the sins of the people. Afterward, the an-

imal was left in the wilderness and dropped from a cliff (5). In Theology and in The Christian Religion the scapegoat symbolizes in Jesus with His Sacrifice, He takes upon Himself the sins of the world to symbolically open doors of heaven to mankind. Figuratively, a scapegoat is someone on whom material or moral responsibility for damages, mistakes or adverse events, is discharged, and who must suffer the consequences and make amends. Looking for a scapegoat is the irrational act of believing a person or a group of people responsible for a series of troubles. In his works, the anthropologist René Girard, often deals with the dynamic of the scapegoat and with its effects on the single and the group (6). In defining exactly how this dynamic occurs, we have to bear in mind the approach proposed by the psychoanalysis. The psychoanalysis took an interest on the scapegoat to analyze the hidden and unconscious mechanisms which come into play when a group identifies an "intended victim". According to Jung the scapegoat represents, psychoanalytically, "the shadow" of the group, that are those aspects and those behavioural characteristics that the members of the group do not accept of themselves, and want to refuse and deny, and which they feel threatened by. Through the modality called "transfert", all this is projected on one of the members, the one who, more than others, represents and carries those characteristics. In a group transfert, the whole group transfers on the scapegoat the negativity and gets free from it (7). Through this, irrational and baseless "Magical thinking", the group growth is ensured by the expulsion, often the real elimination, of what is perceived as a source of negative and "disturbing" energy (8). All this in order to reduce the sense of anxiety caused by the pursuing of the survival of the group in adverse and difficult situations.

In "Totem and Taboo" (9) the Author, S. Freud, mentions the "totemic meal" in which the person considered "impure" in a group is devoured by its members, who assimilate his energy and "spirit", even though they may regret their action, and feel "resentment" (and sense of guilt) (9). In psychoanalytic literature the symbol of scapegoat is represented by Oedipus, figure taken from the tragedy by Aeschylus. He is the individual who committed an offence intolerable for community, and is casted out and isolated.

The searching for a scapegoat, someone responsible for a bad economic, social political trend is usually an important mechanism of propaganda: for instance, Nazi propaganda identified the Jews as the source of Germany's national troubles. The status of scapegoat is usually attributed to a minority group, that finds it difficult to defend because of its known weakness. A strategy frequently used is to extend to whole group the blame for the unethical or immoral conduct of a small number of members. In History we have had a lot of scapegoats, think for instance of "niggers", immigrants, communists, "southerners", "witches", women, Cathars, Jews, "crazies", lepers, homosexuals, drug addicts, Christians, handicapped, "gypsies", anarchists and Muslims. The social and political dimension of this phenomenon is extremely important in defining any behaviour or attitude considered "deviant", or not compliant to the group. It is

also important to know the psychological mechanism that makes a subject more likely to get into the conditions of being appointed a "scapegoat".

There's even a science named "victimology" among criminological and forensic science (10, 11).

In the industrialized societies, the use of traditional minority groups as scapegoats is increasingly frowned upon. To avoid stigma and discrimination even in spoken language the term "politically correct" is in vogue. Nevertheless it is to be underlined that nowadays discrimination shows more hidden and subtle, less noticeable and striking. For this reason cases of mobbing are difficult to be proved before the court without clear evidences. Quite often legal actions against companies taken by employees bullied or alleged come to nothing, in Italy above all due to the still vague regulations.

Objectives

Wherever workers are at close contact these may be the beginning of a search for a scapegoat because harmony and spirit of collaboration often collide with the continuous (and often unjustified) need of blaming someone for the many working and coexistence troubles (12).

Cooper's grid (13) reports the possible sources of psychosocial work stress, and makes clear how important group dynamics are. Work stress causes frictions, disagreements and conflicts, and in order to reduce the suffering caused by these unpleasant conditions all responsibilities are charged to weaker subjects:

Working stress sources according to Cooper's model (1988)

Intrinsic to the Job

- Physical working conditions (noise, light, environmental hygiene, etc.)
- Overworking
- Time pressure
- Responsibility for people's life.

Organization role

- Ambiguities/Role conflict
- Status of occupational role
- Conflicts for boundary roles.

Career development

- Overpromotions
- Relegation
- Lack of safety at work
- Disappointed ambitions.

Work relationships

- Difficult relationships with bosses, subordinates, colleagues
- Difficulty to delegate responsibilities.

Organization structure and climate

- Weak or no participation in decision making or consultation

- Behavior restrictions (budgets, clothing, etc.)
- Care in commitment
- Effective lack of consultation.

It's quite obvious that relationship difficulties of various kind are a stress source, for weak subjects above all. Now, the world weak has all ambiguous and imprecise meaning, for sure it includes isolated subjects, easily affected and stigmatized by colleagues (14).

Analysis on groups and group dynamics carried out by the psychologist W. Bion identified a series of factors, that Bion calls **thesis**:

- the base thesis of **pairing**, that we see in the formalities of aristocracy, institutional rites and in the search for approval;
- the base thesis of **fight-flight**, which organizes forms and behaviours designed to attack and defend, to use organized and direct action by a group of subjects;
- the base thesis of **dependence**, which concerns the expectation for needs to be satisfied thanks to an external power, through delegation, with the waiver of a right or with passivity to a real (e.g. State) or imaged (e.g. Faith) superior institution.

The combination of these three difficult phenomena results in more balanced forms observable in normality, the prevalence of one of them is a symptom of disorder (15). In a research published on *Psychology: An International Journal of Psychology in Orient* (16), applying Bion's theories on "base assumed" and on "valency", scapegoating has been assumed to happen more and more frequently in groups characterized by fight base than in those characterized by other assumed. Also scapegoated members are thought to develop a negative disposition toward the groups they're in. Relying on the Reaction to Group Situation Nara University Test (RF-ST-Nu) 100 not graduated males were divided in 20 homogeneous groups (with the same valency) of 5 members each. There groups were 4 "fight" assumed, 4 "pairing" assumed, 4 flight and 4 "dependence" assumed. It emerged that scapegoating dynamics were more easily developed in "fight" assumed group, and also that within these groups the appointed scapegoat started developing negative feelings towards the corresponding group.

In an article on "Journal of Nursing management" the phenomenon of "Antigroup" is described, i.e. the dynamism of forces that damages the correct structure and development of the group. The motivating factors of disruptive impulses in a group are in most cases constituted by aggressiveness and envy. A great aggressiveness pervades balances and relationships within each group: it's something that reinforces a group but at the same time can create tension and in the long destabilize its internal structures. The role of a good leader is to manage the aggressiveness among members, in order to direct it and avoid it to spread disruptively and without control. In this way aggressiveness, that is a very dangerous element and can cause severe damages, turns into bonding used as a driving force to achieve the expected results (17).

Five neurotic modes of dysfunctional and unhealthy organization have been identified (18), that can bring to the development of scapegoating dynamics:

- paranoid organization
- obsessive organization
- hysterical organization
- depressive organization
- schizoid organization.

Paranoid organization

As well as a paranoid personality, at work a person with paranoid organization fears of being constantly targeted by dangers or threats that may affect the functioning of a company. Analysis of every trouble or threat is performed by considering all possible elements, with the risk of wasting time and energy.

Obsessive organization

This kind of organization differs from the paranoid one for the management controls, which are designed to really monitor internal business, production efficiency, costs, scheduling and results.

Strategic style of "obsessive" companies cares about details and established practices. Fundamental characteristic of this organization is to rely on tradition and consolidated practices.

Hysterical organization

It occurs in quickly and randomly developed companies, unable to adapt their structure to the new operational needs. These companies are hyperactive, impulsive, reckless and dangerously devoid of inhibition, with a strategy characterized by taste for risk. Instead of responding to external events, the leader, often a businessman, tries to build his own environment or to impose his own rules, developing new business, invading new markets as dropping out of some activities, launching new products and so on.

Depressive organization

Main features of this organization are inactivity, lack of trust, extreme conservatism and isolation due to bureaucracy, in an atmosphere of extreme passivity and lack of motivation. The structure is heavily bureaucratic: the company actually works automatically, according to plans, in the light of established rules. In these enterprises there's a lack of leadership: company drifts, without direction as if the leadership shared feelings of powerlessness and inability, to change the course of events in the organization.

Schizoid organization

This kind of organization is featured by a lack of leadership: the leader seems to have no interest in the organization, he refuses to consistent behaviour and hes-

itates to accept suggestions from subordinates preventing that a clear direction for the company grows, therefore the company proceeds disorderly, taking small steps in a direction, and then going back in the opposite one as soon as a new management takes over.

As any kind of neurotic organization generates almost naturally its own internal way of perceiving deviance and incongruous behaviour, each neurotic typology will have his own precise kind of "scapegoat": for instance an obsessive organization will have a hysterical scapegoat, while a schizoid organization may have a paranoid one, etc. (19).

Conclusions

As we've seen scapegoat dynamics has ancient roots, it is a phenomenon very difficult to be eradicated. It can be argued that the possibility to give vent to repressed energy on an intended victim helps to direct part of the destructive form, otherwise latent and dangerous (20). However, this dynamic seems dangerous to be encouraged and supported; a functional investment of aggressiveness is to be recommended, so that people actually guilty of real and certain failures are identified and that instinctual and preconceived forms, related to prejudice toward diversity, to prejudiced judgments or to momentary aggressiveness gain room. Improving communication helps to manage "scapegoating" situations in an efficient and functional way (21, 22). The leader has a basic function, in maintaining the tension within the groups; he must know the most accurate technique of communication and the most useful and effective tools and means of communication, in order to make the group more and more aware of latent tension or possible conflicts (23, 24).

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