

Gift from the Shadows: Some reflections on collective shadows

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Introduction:

Working with the unconscious is always exciting and challenging at the same time. It's like going on a ride inside a scary tunnel, like the ones we have in theme parks. The excitement is about the journey into the unknown and the challenge is to face those things that pop out once a while when you expect the least!

This was our fourth offering of this workshop and we had 13 participants signed up. A few were known people, including two colleagues from ISABS and the rest were strangers to us.

The workshop involved several sessions for "locating" the shadow, experiencing it and name it in the here and now. These sessions ranged from taking a new name, creating list of attributes that one associates oneself with, appreciative interviews into one's life, creating and enacting a scene from one's favorite fairy tale, exercises in movements, dream analysis and using percept language to take back projections.

In this article, we share some of the group level observations on shadow work that we noticed. We believe this may be valuable to explore in other human process labs since these themes run across groups.

Collective Shadow:

We define collective shadows as taboos, forbidden topics, areas we didn't want to look at - anything as a collective that is unacceptable to us, anything that's hidden or denied — what we want to hide from, what we don't want to know about ourselves — that's the collective shadow. So when we try to locate the collective shadow, we looked for the unstated, the missing, the omissions in the process at the group level. These were the group level shadow that we extrapolated to the larger collective.

One of the exercises was to identify qualities that one uses to describe oneself. Participants were encouraged to identify many different dimensions of qualities – based on the body, intellect, emotional space, relationships, roles played and so on. Societal and work roles, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, caste, language and regional affiliations were missing from the list of attributes/qualities that participants created to develop their identity.

One of the insights we gained on exploration of these omissions was the whole "balance" that seem to get created in the society when a section of urban, middle class, intellectuals abandon their religious and caste identity and focus their attention on what is considered superior i.e. spirituality and liberal attitude. Then a large section of people take to extremism in terms of religion! Similarly when Roles and especially Gender roles are unacknowledged in the collective shadow and it get's played out as projections to that part of the society where violence happens over these identities.

The dream work brought out some themes shared as a collective shadow of the group. Some of the themes were:

- Displacement, taking a journey
- Breaking of trust and confidentiality
- Being beaten up for being authentic with your feelings
- Feeling like an outcast in society with respect to morals

The themes indicated the repressed parts in the group – the need to break free, being seen as untrustworthy, not able to express authentically because of fear of being outcast, breaking of moral boundaries and so on. Some of the participants were able to identify their own shadows based on what they chose to associate with in a dream and the expressions given to that association. These were also seen as themes in the larger society.

In one of the dreams there was a suitcase being packed for this person to travel. Five participants identified themselves with the suitcase stating feelings like “happy to travel” “don’t want to go anywhere” “feeling stuffed” and so on, indicating their present state of being that may be unexpressed. .

One of the shadows in the collective unconscious that emerged from the Fairy Tale exercise was the fantasy that there is someone out there who has the power to release you from your current existence – like the Prince Charming! Personal power is in the shadow for many of us and one of the manifestations of that is our reluctance to take responsibility for steering our lives the way we want to live. This was also characterized in the dream identification of the suitcase that is at the mercy of the owner to do what she/he wants to stuff it, take it or leave it.

The unconscious expresses itself in our bodies very often though we may not notice it. It can be twitch of the eyelid, the sweat in the palms, the little jerk of the neck, the lump in the throat and so on. Many processes were created to help participants to become aware of one’s body, through movements, amplification, dance and various theatre exercises. These exercises led to explorations at personal level and participants shared their reflections. At the collective level, we observed that all these processes led to expressions of sexuality and attraction – whether it was in the reflections shared or in the expression of the movements itself i.e. playfulness, flirtatiousness, invitations, expressions of hugging, dance movements and so on. There were sexual energies blocked at the collective level in the group that is also a manifestation of the larger society. Gender, gender roles and attraction to other gender were expressed themes in the reflections. Maybe the collective shadow is the acceptance of cross-gender roles and homophobia.

The group also spent some time exploring interpersonal shadows that seem to have emerged between members in the group. One of the important ways we deal with shadows is to project them to others interpersonally. We see in others, what we don’t wish to see in ourselves. One of the methods used in this workshop to deal with projections was to use the percept language. Percept language is a creation of John and Joyce Weir that helps to own up what you say

to others. For example, instead of saying “ I think you have a problem of dealing with authority” where you are dumping the other person with an issue that he/she may or may not have. You are also seeing “authority issue” because it means something to you and hence projecting it to that person. So, in percept language, we say this as ‘I experience my difficulty in dealing with the authority in me, in you”. Here you own up the authority issue for yourself and sharing this as your experience. Hence you are not dumping this on to the other person as his/her issue. You are inviting the other person with an opportunity to explore this experience yourself.

The participants were encouraged to use percept language throughout the program. During the unstructured inter-personal shadow work, this language became powerful and helped the members to take back their projections. Many of the participants felt that the process really helped in their ability to see the fellow participants in a different light and discover some new dimensions in themselves.

Reclaiming one’s Shadows:

The participants explored shadows using various channels – personal identity, interpersonal interviews, fairy tales, dreams, body movements, theatre and so on. These channels helped them to get a glimpse of their shadows in passing. Some managed to catch that, acknowledge it and public it. Some also managed to acknowledge it as a gift, a source of energy that will help them to enrich their lives.

Epilogue:

One of the interesting aspects of working with the shadows is that, at the end of it all, we fee we have just gone for one round! As if the whole journey was to come back to where we have started.

But one change we notice all the time... we look at ourselves with new eyes. We become more tolerant about ourselves and even start to love some parts that we despised earlier.

On occasions, you will be pleasantly surprised when you raise a toast to yourself for being different from the way you usually were!

Slowly, but surely, you become more human!

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