



Seeing blindness: A combined psychodynamic and interactional approach to the study of ignoring

Christian Dyrland Wåhlin-Jacobsen and Elisabeth Naima Mikkelsen

abstract

This note addresses how ignoring may be investigated as an interactional phenomenon. Ignoring-related practices can be stated to produce absences in the data rather than presences. Thus, their scrutiny poses challenges for analysts. We argue that inspiration can be found in Billig's work, which leverages a relational understanding of unconscious processes combined with the close attention to interactional details associated with the conversation analytical approach. We conceptualize the practices of ignoring through the psychodynamic concept of blindness to demonstrate the combined approach in an exemplary analysis of data obtained from an emergency call center.

Introduction

How can we examine that which is ignored? In this note, we investigate interactions in work settings to address this methodological challenge. Many types of work revolve around interactions, either within or across organizational boundaries. It is therefore relevant to academically focus on the role of ignoring in interaction and to determine its local or distal effects; for example, how it can sustain secrecy or ignorance (Otto et al., 2019). Several scholars have noted that psychodynamic theory can further our

understanding of ignoring, evincing potential means of blinding ourselves to unpleasant or threatening information by relegating it to the unconscious (de Klerk, 2017; Fotaki and Hyde, 2015; Gabriel, 1995). The psychodynamic perspective is, however, typically associated with the interpretation of the effects of hidden-from-view mechanisms. Conversely, conversation analysis is one of the most elaborate approaches to the study of social interactions and is typified by its stringent focus on directly observable phenomena. We combine these approaches, especially drawing on Billig's discursive psychological perspective and his notion that interaction has both 'expressive' and 'repressive' functions (1997, 2006). The amalgamation of a socially-oriented understanding of the unconscious with close attention to interactional details can serve to highlight such functions. We analyze audio-recorded data obtained from an emergency call center to exemplify our approach and demonstrate how call-takers may selectively extract and respond to aspects of caller utterances, thereby 'doing blindness.'

How do unconscious processes contribute to ignoring through blindness?

Ignoring-related practices are often conceptualized as *blindness* in the psychodynamic literature, in particular the loss of moral sight, or the 'temporary inability of a decision-maker to see the ethical dimension of a decision at stake' (Palazzo et al., 2012: 325). The psychoanalytical belief that the unconscious management of unwanted and painful emotions activates various psychological defense mechanisms (Freud, 1936) that may supersede rationality (de Klerk, 2017) forms the core of this contribution. From a psychodynamic perspective, blindness is never complete; threatening information is at least subconsciously registered to the extent that its threatening potential is recognized.¹ However, successfully deployed defense mechanisms prevent the surfacing of this information in conscious awareness while thwarting the realization that defense mechanisms are operating. In other words, defense mechanisms can cover their tracks. A 'social unconscious' (Weinberg, 2007) connects people in organizations

¹ This understanding of blindness is distinct from other understandings found in the ignorance literature (e.g., Knudsen, 2011).

through shared painful emotions associated with the primary task (Menziés, 1960). Social defenses that are evident in organizational structures and processes defend against such adverse collective feelings. Therefore, psychodynamic inquiry is predominantly interested in elucidating the unconscious dynamics behind frequent irrational actions and in illuminating how defense mechanisms can shape customary collective ways of engaging in work.

In organizations, blindness results from the unconscious management of painful emotions and is activated through a dual process. First, unrealistic institutional objectives can fuel blindness by projecting unconscious social demands into workers; for example, the claim that health care workers can prevent death or that the police can contain violence. Numerous public organizations undertake such impossible tasks and consequently serve as ‘receptacle[s] for containing social anxieties’ (Hoggett, 2006: 177). Second, social defense mechanisms prevent workers from gaining awareness about the impossible demands that they confront, thereby enabling blindness (Fotaki and Hyde, 2015). Defense mechanisms often manifest in *emotion mitigation* enacted primarily through emotional disengagement; for instance, people may use seemingly logical explanations to rationalize controversial behaviors (de Klerk, 2017) or project unwanted personal emotions or aspects onto others to uphold a desired self-definition (Klein, 1946). Projections mitigate emotions because they can strip others of their human qualities (Petriglieri and Stein, 2012), making them unworthy of attention and effort.

Different understandings exist regarding the ontology of unconscious processes. While medically inspired approaches tend to focus on the unconscious as operating ‘within’ people, relational approaches attend to the social dynamics through which unconscious processes manifest and address the interactional processes through which they are labeled (Mitchell and Aron, 1999; Streeck, 2008). Unconscious processes are viewed within the relational perspective as necessarily social because they must be articulated in talk or action to matter; they must manifest in interactions and be recognized, instead of remaining a ‘mental entity’ (Billig, 2006).

Studying unconscious processes in interactions

The conceptualization of ignoring-related practices as blindness entails giving the unconscious a place in scientific enterprises (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020). However, the empirical identification of unconscious processes is not straightforward because such processes are not directly observable. Moreover, analysts could be seduced into subscribing to a defensive framing of a situation if defense mechanisms effectively naturalize their own effects. We contend in this study that our understanding of unconscious processes can be advanced through methods designed for close analysis of interaction, that is, by attending to ‘what can be seen or heard’ rather than ‘leaning on fantasies about what lies behind’ (Streeck, 2008: 187). Numerous pathways may be employed to combine psychodynamic sensibilities with close analysis of interaction. Hence, we will briefly discuss some perspectives, their theoretical differences, and their methodological implications.

Conversation analytic studies of psychotherapy denote one such approach. Peräkylä (2005, 2008) demonstrated the ways in which therapists introduce interpretations of unconscious processes and how emotions are shown and responded to. Such studies follow classic conversation analytic conventions to address how each turn of talk displays and enacts an understanding of the previous utterance and the ongoing activity. This ‘next-turn proof procedure’ is pivotal for the construction and maintenance of intersubjectivity by interlocutors. Moreover, tracking the relationships between individual utterances allows analyses that are firmly and demonstrably grounded in the data. However, concepts such as the unconscious are simultaneously treated as purely discursive phenomena and emotionality is addressed primarily for its communicative functions (Paoletti, 2012). Therefore, a narrow conversation analytic approach would remain agnostic about the role of unconscious processes in interactions.

On the contrary, Billig (2006) partially subscribes to and partially redefines psychodynamic concepts. Theoretically, Billig’s investigation is grounded in the discursive psychological approach and its Wittgensteinian understanding of language as a set of tools intended to perform social actions. Hence, psychological concepts do not merely represent mental

phenomena; instead, we should strive to understand how psychological phenomena are constituted in social situations and try to determine the situational relevance of using psychological concepts in interaction (Wåhlin-Jacobsen, 2020).

Billig's view of unconscious processes extends the idea that morality involves ongoing (but often implicit) negotiations between the parties to the situation. However, he advances this perspective beyond the immediate circumstances by contending that unconscious processes are rooted in socialization; as the parent teaches the child to behave politely, the child also learns what is deemed inappropriate. Morally improper images and impulses are not extinguished; rather, we learn to withhold them, explain them away, and to ignore them in the actions of others, though they may be observable in the form of taboos, slips of the tongue, or humor (Billig, 2006). The notion that language simultaneously encompasses expressive and repressive functions explains how we respond selectively to the actions of others or how we may use language to naturalize our actions (Billig, 1997, 2006).

According to Billig, one set of criteria by which we judge if unconscious processes are at play is whether people's actions seem morally accountable or not. For example, we may observe people make racist statements while denying being racist, or rationalizing behaviours which seem grounded in greed, spite or infatuation. Since such observations may shape the way we approach a situation without actually being made explicit, Billig advocates for transcending the traditional conversation analytic approach by also considering the potential hearings of previous utterances that do *not* surface in the responses of other parties. Further, since unconscious processes are necessarily socially attributed, the analyst's general competence as a cultural member can inform choices about where to focus attention for closer analysis by observing when actions seem unaccountable. Cognized from the psychodynamic orientation, such situations can be understood as traces of defense mechanisms that do not completely succeed in covering up their operations.

It is pertinent to consider the current principles of the psychodynamic analysis of organizing to further elucidate the last point. In this context, the

researcher must ask the question ‘what could be happening here?’, and then interpret the observed behavior (de Klerk, 2017). This interpretational process involves making inferences from notable absences in the data (Stein, 2004) and treats researcher subjectivity not as a limitation, but as a vital source of data (Petriglieri, 2020) in itself. Hence, this type of inquiry extracts certain cues, which must be plausible and meaningful.

We suggest examining the data for unusual connections, irrational or unreasonable practices, and contradictions (Gabriel, 1995; Vince, 2019). These outcomes can manifest as individual and social defenses against emotions, such as rationalizations, projections, and shared fantasies (Mikkelsen et al., 2020). For instance, irrational practices can represent key signals that allude to unconscious subtexts associated with identity threats and attendant anxiety (Vince, 2019). In this regard, the aim is to identify patterns of emotional behavior between people in a system and not to understand individual psychology. Instances of emotional expression—and lack thereof—should be considered markers of the transfer of intrapsychic ambivalence to transpersonal exchanges.

In addition, we recommend that analyses of unconscious dynamics can involve attending to *what* is said in the data and *how* it is said, including what is left unsaid (Padavic et al., 2020). For example, equivocation, deflections, incoherence, and hesitations can be interpreted as signals of unwanted emotions being managed to avoid feelings of distress. Such maneuvers warrant attention through how they may simultaneously lead to or maintain blindness to the potentially questionable moral status of certain actions. The section that follows demonstrates the application of our combined approach in an analysis of interactional data obtained from an emergency call center.

An empirical example: Blindness in emergency call center work

Emergency call centers are highly stressful work environments (Paoletti, 2012; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1998). Call-takers must manage disturbances from noise and a busy environment and approach every call knowing that even short delays can be catastrophic. Therefore, they must

consistently aim to quickly assess the issue on the caller's side and choose an appropriate response, often based on incomplete or ambiguous information from callers. Meanwhile, they may also occasionally be subjected to various forms of 'face attacks' and tackle criticism or cursing from shocked or angry callers (Svennevig, 2012).

Diverse studies have addressed conflicts in emergency call center interactions from a communicational perspective (Whalen et al., 1988; e.g., Svennevig, 2012). However, it seems relevant to consider ways in which blindness triggered by unconscious processes could also influence the development of such conflicts, thereby illustrating our methodological approach. Our example features data from a study by Whalen & Zimmerman (1988)², which examined a call to a Dallas, Texas emergency hotline about a woman with respiratory problems. The call ended with the caller (a stepson of the unconscious woman) hanging up without an ambulance being dispatched, and the woman died. The situation escalated into a public debate and ultimately, the nurse call-taker was fired. We argue that this call can be used to demonstrate how one can analyze the processes in which unconscious management of unwanted emotions keep information from being recognized in interaction.

Following the aforementioned approach, the following section focuses on a sequence marked by several interesting features, notable critiques by both parties, rejections, and apparent mutual non-hearings of each other's contributions. Before the excerpt cited below, the caller (C) requested an ambulance and was subsequently transferred to the nurse (N), who ascertained the caller's address. C had not explicitly criticized N up to this juncture, but Whalen and Zimmerman described his tone of voice as 'irritated' and 'exasperated' (1988: 337) as he was asked multiple times to provide the street name.

² In terms of the symbols used in the transcription, _ indicates emphasis, ? indicates rising 'question' intonation, : indicates prolonged sound, [] indicates overlapping speech, - indicates cut off sound, () indicates transcript is uncertain due to unclear sound, (0.5) indicates a break of 0.5 seconds, (.) indicates short break, and = indicates latching (i.e. no pauses) between speakers.

Excerpt

- 45 N: And whatiz thuh problem there?
- 46 C: I don't kno:w, if I knew I wouldn't be needin'
- 47 [y-
- 48 N: [Si:r:, I- eh- would you answer my questions
- 49 please? whatiz thu[h problem?]
- 50 C: [She is hav]ing difficult in
- 51 breathing
- (9 lines omitted, dialogue about the age of woman the call is about)
- 60 N: May I speak with her please?
- 61 C: No you ca:n't, she's (ch-) she's (.) seems
- 62 like she's incoherent.
- 63 (0.5)
- 64 N: Why is she incoherent?
- 65 C: How thuh hell do I:: kno::w
- 66 (.)
- 67 N: Sir, don't curse me
- 68 (.)
- 69 C: Well I don't care, you- ya- ya'stupid ass
- 70 (anit-) questions you're asking
- 71 (3.0)
- 72 C: Gimme someone that knows what they're doin',
- 73 why don't you just send an ambulance out here?
- 74 (0.6)

- 75 N: Sir, we only come out on life threatening
 76 eme:r[gencies, okay?]
 77 C: [Well this is life threatening
 78 emergency=
 79 N: =hold on sir, I'll let you speak with
 80 my sup- uh officer

First, we note how N maintains her blindness to her part in the tense exchange. C's annoyed tone of voice before the quoted excerpt indicates his orientation toward receiving assistance as quickly as possible. However, the mere request for an ambulance is usually insufficient grounds for one to be dispatched (Whalen et al., 1988). Here, N's l. 45 turn solicits a form of account from C as to the reason for his request. The relatively direct form of the request implies that N considers it unproblematic (Curl and Drew, 2008). However, C claims not to know, and the last part of his answer ('if I knew...') treats N's question as inapposite. N responds by asking that C 'answer [her] questions' and reiterates her query verbatim. In doing so, she treats C's first response as a 'complainable' nonresponse, disregarding that her direct phrasing of the question could have contributed to his reaction. We could interpret from the psychodynamic perspective that N registers C's l. 46 turn as an attack on her performance of the call-taker role, which elicits unwanted emotions in her. Nevertheless, she appears to uphold her approach to defend against the evoked emotions. The conflict is seemingly resolved when C next produces a lay description of the situation, and N continues to collect additional details on the situation.

The previously noted adverse pattern is however repeated shortly thereafter when N requests to speak with the sick woman (l. 60). C rejects her request, arguing that she is incoherent, and N again solicits an account from C using direct phrasing: 'why is she incoherent?' (l. 64). As before, C claims inability to offer a response in a manner that implies that N's question is misplaced, and he again questions the legitimacy of her actions. Subsequently, N reprimands C for 'cursing' her. We interpret from the psychodynamic perspective that N unconsciously handles her unwanted emotions evoked by

the second attack by projecting into C that C is noncooperative and hostile. She envisages these characteristics in C through her defense mechanism of projective identification. This projection renders him accountable for the conflict and relieves N from the threat to her professional identity posed by his criticism and also probably by her increasingly hostile feelings toward him. Oriented towards the claimed inappropriateness of C's contributions, N does not see that C's actions could be provoked by the local stress of his situation or that aspects of her practice could be interpreted by C as an undue delay in responding to his demands for an ambulance, thereby agitating him.

The remainder of the excerpt illustrates how N disregards the urgency of C's perspective. We see in line 69-70 that N's admonition is rejected and further criticism of N's questions is added by C. When N does not take the conversational floor for another three seconds (which is relatively long, given the high pace of the conversation), C voices direct criticism of N's abilities before reiterating his request for the dispatch of an ambulance. N again avoids the direct address of C's criticism, offering a reason why she cannot dispatch an ambulance: it is only sent out for 'life-threatening emergencies.' Her offered rationale directly questions C's description of the issue as urgent. N's assessment that the situation is not life-threatening could be rooted in the defense mechanism of rationalization, whereby she makes her refusal to dispatch help less threatening to herself by normalizing it. The apparent irrationality of refusing help to an incoherent woman with respiratory problems indicates an unconscious subtext, probably N's management of her intense hostility toward C. This interpretation is supported by how N goes on to summon her supervisor on the line when C insists that the situation is life-threatening (l. 79-80). Notably, the supervisor reprimands C, threatening to end the call if he curses again. We interpret this response to C as N's need to defend herself against caller transgression.

In sum, N is subjected to both direct and indirect criticism from C about her handling of the call. However, N positions C as a noncooperative and hostile caller instead of attributing C's attitude to the stress of his situation and as his reaction to her own repeated questions. This projection functions to defend her against her unwanted emotions of hostility and reinforces her

refusal to help C owing to his criticism. Moreover, N's irrational assessment of the situation as not life-threatening also supports this interpretation. Thus, N's blindness concerns C's extreme desperation owing to the call screening process as well as the fact that transgressive and noncooperative callers may also have a relevant need for assistance. The ostensible irrationality of the situation can be intuitively sensed; however, it can more systematically be analyzed by attending to those parts of the interlocutors' utterances that are not taken up by the other party, such as the hearable understandings that are ignored.

Conclusion

Studying practices of ignoring, we should attend to work-related interactions, both because these constitute a principal aspect of work in numerous environments and because interactional data can offer access to phenomena unobservable or not easily recorded through other means such as interviews, documents, or observation notes. We have discussed how unconscious processes can promote ignoring through the 'doing of blindness', and we have described how such blindness may be investigated as an interactional phenomenon. In particular, ascriptions of unconscious processes by analysts can be grounded in the detailed study of interactional features, where they leave traces in the form of strange associations, irrational practices and contradictions. The analysis of such traces enables greater transparency. Consistent with Billig, we argue that this possibility is rooted in the simultaneously expressive and repressive functions of language. The latter role can leave traces that can be tracked by emphasizing the aspects of utterances not directly addressed in participants' responses, yielding an interactional 'dark matter' that is not directly visible but must be considered for a more comprehensive understanding of what is at play in a given exchange.³ Certainly, this recourse also signifies that the proposed method is principally relevant to examine ignoring constituted by processes at some conscious or subconscious levels; issues completely unseen, on the

³ We thank special issue editor Morten Knudsen for pointing our attention to this metaphor.

other hand, can be ignored without threat to one's moral status, thereby leaving no traces.

references

- Billig, M. (1997) 'The dialogic unconscious: Psychoanalysis, discursive psychology and the nature of repression', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 36(2): 139–159.
- Billig, M. (2006) 'A psychoanalytic discursive Psychology: From consciousness to unconsciousness', *Discourse Studies*, 8(1): 17–24.
- Brown, A.D. (1997) 'Narcissism, identity, and legitimacy', *Academy of Management Review*, 22(3): 643–686.
- Curl, T.S. and P. Drew (2008) 'Contingency and action: A comparison of two forms of requesting', *Research on language and social interaction*, 41(2): 129–153.
- de Klerk, J.J. (2017) 'Nobody is as blind as those who cannot bear to see: Psychoanalytic perspectives on the management of emotions and moral blindness', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 141(4): 745–761.
- Fotaki, M. and P. Hyde (2015) 'Organizational blind spots: Splitting, blame and idealization in the National Health Service', *Human Relations*, 68(3): 441–462.
- Freud, A. (1936) *The ego and the mechanisms of defence*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Gabriel, Y. (1995) 'The unmanaged organization: Stories, fantasies and subjectivity', *Organization Studies*, 16(3): 477–501.
- Gould, L., L.F. Stapley and M. Stein (2001) *The systems psychodynamics of organizations*. New York: Karnac.
- Hoggett, P. (2006) 'Conflict, ambivalence, and the contested purpose of public organizations', *Human Relations*, 59(2): 175–194.
- Klein, M. (1946) 'Notes on some schizoid mechanisms', in M. Klein (ed.) *Envy and gratitude and other works 1946–1963*. New York: The Free Press.

- Knudsen, M. (2011) 'Forms of inattentiveness: The production of blindness in the development of a technology for the observation of quality in health services', *Organization Studies*, 32(7): 963–989.
- Menzies, I.E.P. (1960) 'A case-study in the functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety: A report on a study of the nursing service of a general hospital', *Human Relations*, 13(2): 95–121.
- Mikkelsen, E.N., B. Gray and A. Petersen (2020) 'Unconscious processes of organizing: Intergroup conflict in mental health care', *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 57(7): 1355-1383.
- Mitchell, S.A. and L. Aron (eds.) (1999) *Relational psychoanalysis*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.
- Otto, B., J.G. Pors and R. Johnsen (2019) 'Hidden in full view: The organization of public secrecy in Miéville's *The City and the City*', *Culture and Organization*, 25(2): 91–103.
- Padavic I., R.J. Ely and E.M. Reid (2020) 'Explaining the persistence of gender inequality: The work–family narrative as a social defense against the 24/7 work culture', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 65(1): 61–111.
- Palazzo, G., F. Krings and U. Hoffrage (2012) 'Ethical blindness', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 109(3): 323–338.
- Paoletti, I. (2012) 'Operators managing callers' sense of urgency in calls to the medical emergency number', *Pragmatics*, 22(4): 671–695.
- Peräkylä, A. (2005) 'Patients' responses to interpretations: A dialogue between conversation analysis and psychoanalytic theory', *Communication & Medicine*, 2(2): 163–176.
- Peräkylä, A. (2008) '6 - Conversation analysis and psychoanalysis: Interpretation, affect, and intersubjectivity', in A. Peräkylä, C. Antaki, S. Vehviläinen, et al. (eds.) *Conversation analysis and psychotherapy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Petriglieri, G. (2020) 'F** k science!?! An invitation to humanize organization theory', *Organization Theory*, 1(1): 1–18.
- Petriglieri, G. and J.L. Petriglieri (2020) 'The return of the oppressed: A systems psychodynamic approach to organization studies', *Academy of Management Annals*, 14(1): 411–449.

- Petriglieri, G. and M. Stein (2012) 'The unwanted self: Projective identification in leaders' identity work', *Organization Studies*, 33(9): 1217–1235.
- Stein, M. (2004) 'The critical period of disasters: Insights from sense-making and psychoanalytic theory', *Human Relations*, 57(10): 1243–1261.
- Streeck, U. (2008) 'A psychotherapist's view of conversation analysis', in A. Peräkylä, C. Antaki, S. Vehviläinen, et al. (eds) *Conversation analysis and psychotherapy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Svennevig, J. (2012) 'On being heard in emergency calls: The development of hostility in a fatal emergency call', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(11): 1393–1412.
- Vince, R. (2019) 'Institutional illogics: The unconscious and institutional analysis', *Organization Studies*, 40(7): 953–973.
- Weinberg, H. (2007) 'So what is this social unconscious anyway?', *Group Analysis*, 40(3): 307–322.
- Whalen, J. and D.H. Zimmerman (1998) 'Observations on the display and management of emotion in naturally occurring activities: The case of 'hysteria' in calls to 9-1-1', *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 61(2): 141–159.
- Whalen J., D.H. Zimmerman and M.R. Whalen (1988) 'When words fail: A single case analysis', *Social Problems*, 35(4): 335–362.
- Wåhlin-Jacobsen, C.D. (2020) 'Open or closed? A social interaction perspective on line managers' reactions to employee voice', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 34(1): 32–57.

the authors

Christian Dyrland Wåhlin-Jacobsen is an Assistant Professor of Organizational Psychology at the Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School. His research interests encompass workplace interaction, leadership, and employee participation. His work has been published in outlets such as *Human Relations*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, and *Discourse & Communication*.

Email: cdw.ioa@cbs.dk

Elisabeth Naima Mikkelsen is an Associate Professor of Organizational Psychology at the Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School. Her research interests include work relationships in organizations and she employs qualitative research designs to inquire beneath the surface of organizations and beyond individual experiences of organizing. Her work on hidden, emotionally charged organizing has appeared in journals such as *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization*, and *Group and Organization Management*.

Email: enm.ioa@cbs.dk