

Chapter 11

A Systems Psychodynamic Perspective on Conflict and Failure at Work



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Abstract This chapter provides an in-depth insight into ethnographic experiences of conflict and failure in a South African work context. The conflict is analysed and interpreted from systems psychodynamic theory perspectives, to provide new and differentiated ideas on the in-depth complexity of conflict experiences in a specific cultural context. The purpose of this chapter is to offer insight into an intra- and inter-psychological conflict experience from an ethnographic perspective, in the South African post-apartheid work context. An ethnographic research methodology, which is anchored in the research paradigm of Dilthey's modern hermeneutics and a natural research approach, is used. This chapter presents a single case study of an intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict in a selected South African workplace. This conflict escalated over 4 years, remained unresolved and was therefore experienced as a failure from the perspective of the participant of the research study. The aim of this chapter is to provide insights into conflict experiences which arose between two individuals of different cultural origins at work and their underlying system psychodynamic impacts of the experienced failure. The research methods used include: interviews, field notes, contextual descriptions and interpretations based on the theoretical framework of systems psychodynamics. Recommendations for future theory and practice to overcome intercultural conflict and experiences of failure at work are offered.

Keywords Mistakes · Errors · Failure · Organisational ethnography · Failure · Intercultural work conflict · Systems psychodynamic · Cultural embeddedness · Interpretative hermeneutics

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11.1 Introduction

From Western perspectives, the African continent is often associated with violence, war and unresolved conflicts (Janzen 2016). Western perspectives on conflict and failure and their resolution in African countries and work contexts have been discussed critically with regard to power relations, inequality and ideology—and a call for different perspectives on conflict and its management has evolved (Mayer and Louw 2012; Nader and Grande 2002).

The management of conflict and failure in African contexts is an issue that has been well-researched from various disciplinary perspectives, such as management (Mayer and Louw 2012), psychology (Van Niekerk 2013) or cultural anthropology (Vigh 2008), and is often described in Western, *etic* terms (Mayer 2005). This, however, leads to the presentation of conflict in African contexts through Westernised worldviews and does not necessarily lead to differentiated, heterogeneous and culture-specific insights into *emic* concepts of conflict and its management (Mayer 2005, 2008; Mayer and Louw 2012). This might lead to stereotypic views, culturalisation and generalisation when defining and understanding conflict and its management within a certain cultural context (Lin 2010).

Culture is characterised by hybridisation and inner complexity and can be defined, according to Bennett (2017), as “the coordination of meaning and action within a bounded group”. This allows for a broad and general understanding of the cultural concept which yields, on an individual level, the culture of worldview while including the idea of the individual being part of a group with boundaries. According to Berry (1989), *emic* approaches provide culture-specific insights and detailed, fairly non-stereotypic information.

Mahadevan and Mayer (2017) find that because of increasing sociocultural diversity within organisations and societies, new and context-specific approaches and insights are needed to understand and revise power relations and conflict. Mayer (2008) emphasises that conflict needs an *emic* understanding from the inside of the self and the sociocultural context. Syed (2008) highlights that specific contours of cultural diversity in societies, as well as in the workplace, need to be taken into account and context-specific research is needed to deal with diversity and cultural phenomena on an intersecting level (Syed 2008; Syed and Özbilgin 2009). This is specifically true for reoccurring conflictual communication situations in specific cultural contexts and for individuals of different cultural origins acting within these (organisational) contexts (Mayer and May 2018). Accordingly, conflict is defined as being part of sociocultural interaction (Mayer and Louw 2012) in which the interaction is experienced from different points of views and interest, which might lead to clashes (Mayer 2006). Failure to manage conflict often leads to distrust and diminished relationship building (Elo et al. 2015) but may also be seen as a resource to develop and grow individually.

Micro-level ethnographic investigation can shed new light on conflict as a terrain of context, action and meaning (Vigh 2008; Beek and Göpfert 2012), calling for ethnographic, reflexive case study research on conflict in work contexts in

sub-Saharan Africa to develop increasingly differentiated knowledge and understanding of conflict from a systemic perspective. In-depth knowledge is created when different layers of systems are taken into account, and the creation of meaning of conflict experiences unfolds at different systemic levels to develop a differentiated and reflexive knowledge, questioning implicit power relations (Mahadevan and Mayer 2017). These different levels can be explored by applying systems psychodynamic theory to ethnographic descriptions, thereby addressing individual and group level perspectives in an in-depth, systemic manner (Schruijer and Curseu 2014). Systems psychosocial dynamic approaches are used in this research to explore a single-case communication situation in South Africa between two colleagues of different cultural origins. This exploration of new perspectives can foster in-depth insights, individual development and personal growth (Vikkelso 2012).

11.2 Purpose and Aim

The aim of this chapter is to present a single-case conflict, experienced by one individual and presented as an ethnographic description which is analysed and interpreted through the lens of systems psychodynamics theories. The purpose is to present an in-depth insight into a selected example of culturally embedded conflict and provide the reader with a new and differentiated understanding of an interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict while taking power relations and conscious and unconscious systems psychodynamics on individual and group level into account.

11.2.1 *Systems Psychodynamics and Group Relations*

The systems psychodynamics theory provides theoretical approaches based on psychoanalytic patterns of interpretation which attempt to understand the experiences, processes, feelings and behaviour of groups by including the analysis and interpretation of conscious and unconscious processes and structures (Miller 1993; Cilliers et al. 2012; Steyn and Cilliers 2016).

Systems need to deal with emotions and uncertainties. In case the system is not able to contain these emotions or thoughts, individuals within the system become “containers” and are thereby unconsciously absorbed into the system (Motsoaledi and Cillers 2012). If the emotions run high, they might be projected onto an object within the system to contain the unbearable (Motsoaledi and Cillers 2012). Anxiety is often motivating unconscious and conscious dynamics within systems, impacting on behaviour, emotions and thoughts (Klein 2005; Shongwe 2014), thereby defending against powerlessness and paralysis and anxiety itself (Sievers 2009). When emotions are not addressed, defence mechanisms occur, such as splitting, projection, idealisation, rationalisation, simplification and denial (Blackman 2004; Stapley 1996, 2006), which can lead to conflict.

Splitting describes a dynamic in which individuals fail to see the self and others as a unit or as a cohesive whole individual owing to unconscious anxieties (Klein 1988). Splitting leads to an all-or-nothing thinking, and individuals might split off unwanted feelings, thoughts or experiences which are unappreciated or which they reject (Cilliers and Smit 2006). In this thinking, the whole cannot be integrated. This splitting applies to the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion (Cilliers and Smit 2006) and can occur in subgroups and along boundaries, such as national belonging, age, work abilities or other perceived differences, such as race or gender (Shemla et al. 2014). In this case, the system splits up parts which are not attainable and projects them onto “the other”. The other contains the unwanted or even idealised parts, until the system grows in strength and is able to retrieve what belongs to itself and with what it can now deal with (Cilliers and Smit 2006).

This defence mechanism of projection refers to projecting undesirable feelings, thoughts, experiences, attitudes or parts—which are unconsciously inherent in the system—onto a system’s object. The person projecting cannot cope with a certain part and therefore projects it onto another object in the system, thereby imagining that this part belongs to the other, not to the self (Huffington et al. 2004; Cilliers and May 2010). Since life experiences are usually a product of previous experiences which have been gained during childhood (Fraher 2004) or in previous important relationships, they impact on contemporary experiences by being projected onto contemporary situations (Klein 1997).

Based on the projections, the projector’s unwanted parts enter the psychological system of the other, and the recipient starts identifying with the projections, creating a process of projective identification (Cilliers and Smit 2006). The recipient claims ownership of the projected parts, and the projector believes that the projections are part of the recipient, while the receiver’s behaviour changes in accordance with the needs of the projector (Campbell and Huffington 2008). Strong emotions and high anxiety levels might stimulate communication of needs through projective identification (Bion 1961; Klein 1997; Myburg 2009; Van Tonder 2012).

The defence mechanism of introjection describes a dynamic in which the individual needs an object to identify with and to internalise and contain projections (Klein 1997; Fraher 2004). Thereby, the individual internally replicates behaviours, attributes or other fragments of the environment or surrounding world (Cilliers 2012). During this process, the individual takes experiences from the outside world into the self while being unaware of the whole system (Cilliers et al. 2012). Through introjection (in terms of internalisation), experiences from the past, such as those with the family of origin, are transferred into the present and unconsciously impact on the current behaviour of the individual (Stapley 2006).

Rationalisation and intellectualisation provide the individual with intellectual explanations for systems psychodynamic mechanisms, for example, splitting or projection, and for their behaviour (Cilliers 2005; Cilliers and May 2010). Another defence mechanism is idealisation, in which individuals relate to an object within the system by idealising it, for example, an imagined caring parental figure (Cilliers 2017). The idealisation is often based on idealised (symbolic) interactions or on idealised imagined figures. Simplification is also a defence mechanism, working

with concepts which are reduced in complexity and understanding, based on a simplified image of the world, the phenomenon or the system (Cilliers and Terblanche 2010).

Finally, denial is defined as an act of disowning the unaccepted parts of the self, an experience or behaviour, by applying the idea that this part no longer exists. By using this defence mechanism, the part remains part of the system's unconsciousness and of the self. Therefore, denial is usually only a temporary solution since it reoccurs within the system (Stapley 1996).

11.2.2 Conflict and Systems Psychodynamics

From a systems psychodynamic perspective, conflict can be seen as a macro-systemic competition of status, power and privilege that evokes certain behaviour and dynamics on individual and interpersonal levels (Cilliers 2012). It is used as a powerful defence against group dynamics which result from uncertainty and anxiety (Myburg 2009). The conflict might manifest on individual levels or between levels and might turn into the experience of failure. When conflict manifests intrapersonally, it is usually expressed through conflicting feeling or ideas. When conflict occurs interpersonally, it might be expressed in arguments or misunderstandings (Cilliers and Koortzen 2005). Conflict can occur in individuals or subgroups on behalf of the larger systems which the individuals and subsystems are part of (Rice 1951). They might also reflect the larger system.

Further, the individual who contains the emotions within a system is often associated with being a symbolic parent through containment and is therefore experienced as a protective force (Kaplan and Lipinsky-Kella 2015; Shongwe 2014). When the defence mechanisms to deal with anxieties and insecurities within a system are intense, it is possible that containment of feelings can become a real challenge which then might lead to conflictual situations (Aram et al. 2015; Armstrong and Rustin 2015). When power modes change, for example, in terms of gender modes, conflict might occur, and containers for emotions and certain group dynamics, anxieties and uncertainties could change (Kinnear 2014; Shongwe 2014). This could lead to conflict, the experience of chaos, limited resources or other challenges (Meyer and Boninelli 2007) and might be associated unconsciously with conflicts anchored earlier in life (Krantz 2001).

Conflict might be based in identity challenges, identity confusion or reconstruction (identity-based conflict), or it could be anchored in interests (Cilliers and Terblanche 2010). Interest-based conflict is founded in the unconscious need for recognition, dignity, safety and control (Cilliers and Terblanche 2010). Conflict, however, might also occur as the result of confusion around roles and authorities (Cilliers and Koortzen 2005; Cytrynbaum and Noumair 2004; Naik 2014), blurred or undefined boundaries and boundary management (Cilliers and Terblanche 2010) or transference and countertransference in symbolic relationships which are reconstructed from earlier life experiences. Within systems, conscious and unconscious

psychological boundaries are usually created between conflicting individuals and/or subsystems (Kets De Vries 2007). Conflict and bullying often circle around questions of containment and the definition of boundaries in combination with the search for recognition (White 2004). Bound to the issue of boundaries are questions of defining formal and informal authority, as well as self-authority (Cilliers and Koortzen 2005; Naik 2014; Stapley 2008) which might lead to conflicts within systems (Stapley 2006).

11.2.3 Research Methodology

This study uses an ethnographic research approach (Ellis 2007) anchored within the research paradigm of Dilthey's (2002) modern hermeneutics. In this approach, the past experiences of a single individual are remembered and reviewed from a present perspective (Abrahao 2012) while viewing and interpreting the personal and subjective experience of the self within the social and cultural context (Reed-Danahay 2001). The research uses the subjective perspective in the findings and thereby provides in-depth and rich, differentiated insights (Doloriert and Sambrook 2012).

The study uses multiple ethnographic research methods which were applied over a longitudinal period, such as interviews, field notes, diary writing and observation. Field notes in an organisational context were taken by the researcher. Field notes and diaries were written, and personal documentation and information was used to reconstruct the described situation through the "reconstructive memory" (Adams et al. 2017). Interviews were conducted with the individual and colleagues in the work context. The situation described was chosen from various conflict experiences observed owing to its varied in-depth layers and multifold, complex systemic context. Data types were analysed through content analysis and interpreted and reconstructed by referring to Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter's (Terre Blanche et al. 2006) qualitative analysis model.

This ethnographic approach is based on qualitative research criteria, including confirmability, credibility, transferability and dependability (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The descriptions are based on the openness of the individual as well as on managing the complexity of the experiences from an in-depth perspective. Ethical considerations are important in this ethnographical research due to the fact that narrations on self and others carry a moral responsibility (Richardson 1990) and ethical implications. In this research, internal confidentiality was provided, and anonymity of people involved was assured (Ellis 2007).

The findings are not provided to produce generalisable insights but rather to relate to in-depth knowledge and experiences which might create new and complex, context-specific insights and understanding, to build a base for future research on conflict and its management.

11.2.4 Findings and Discussion

A single-case situation is presented here, which was experienced as conflictual by a selected individual during 4 years of working at a higher education institution in South Africa. The researcher presents the situation described by a single individual, through the use of the above-mentioned research methods.

The conflict occurred at a university in post-apartheid South Africa at which the researched person worked for several years. During that time, South Africa found itself in uncertain and challenging times, with a decreasing economy and increasing brain drain, violence and corrupt elites as well as governmental scandals. At the same time, universities were challenged financially, as well as by student protests on campuses throughout the country, with movements like #FeesMustFall (a student movement fighting for the possibility to study without paying fees). Sometimes the campuses were closed for days due to violent protests, and security measures were increasing, as was the competition of academics in search of funds. Consequently several academics left the institution and the country, in search of more peaceful and stable societies to live in, while the actions of black economic empowerment (BEE) and affirmative action (AA) policies increased, promoting employees from “previously disadvantaged groups” (namely, “Black”, including African, Coloured and Indian employees). The conflict described occurred during these contextual challenges and uncertainties. The researched person had just begun working in the institution. She is of German descent and had lived in the country for many years and had worked in different positions in higher education institutions.

Excerpts of interviews are presented with regard to the conflict and failure experienced by the researched person (Y). These excerpts were all recorded in 2016 when Y looked back at her past 4 years having worked at the institution. In the following, two selected conflict narrations will be analysed and discussed, based on systems psychodynamic theory.

When I came to work this morning, I met X, one of my African junior colleagues, in the car park. He usually asks me how I am and when I will be returning to Germany. Since I started working in the department, four years ago, I have had a lot of short interactions with him. The first day I met him in 2012 he told me he loved Germany—such a “rich, developed and safe country”—and that he was looking for a German girlfriend. I just nodded and did not react verbally. This happened several times over the first two years until I told him that I was married. Since then there were hardly any interactions between us. If we talk, he asks me how Germany is and I respond that “Germany is fine, as far as I know.” However, I always wonder why he only talks with me about my national origin. (At work, February 2016)

11.2.4.1 The Love for Germany and a German Girlfriend

The collegial relationship between X and Y started with the statement that X loved Germany and that he attempted to find a German girlfriend. He restated this several times during the first year of the work relationship, which left Y questioning why he would say something like that and feeling irritated and confused about it. These

feelings were completely contrary to her thoughts, her rationalisations and her intellectualisations of the situation (Cilliers 2005; Cilliers and May 2010). Y rationalised that she should see this statement as a friendly act of connecting with her, of an expression of appreciation of her origin, as an act of small talk and an attempt to create contact. She thereby intellectualised the situation and the statement.

Focusing on this communication from a systems psychodynamic perspective, the statement was a defence mechanism using splitting (Klein 1988; Cilliers and Smit 2006), in terms of nationality and gender. It created X as a South African citizen (internal) and Y as a German (external). This dynamic can be interpreted as an indication of uncertainty on how to approach her as a foreign national, as an outsider, in X's department, country and nation. It indicates that X did not integrate Y into his systems (national, organisational, self) but rather saw her as an external, as a representative of the European (White) culture within his system. In the case of seeing her as a White representative, his rejection might have been a projection of his anger connected to Whites having been the "perpetrators" as colonialists during apartheid, a projection which carries strong historical content.

In Y's understanding, X had reproduced the split regarding possibly historically motivated in-group/out-group experiences unconsciously, perhaps based on fear and anger from previous experiences, recreating exclusion (Cilliers and Smit 2006) through the defence mechanism of idealisation regarding national belonging and gender (Shemla et al. 2014), highlighting: "I always wanted a German girlfriend".

As a female professor, Y felt reduced by this gendered statement that associated her with a "girlfriend" rather than with a professional colleague. She felt as if she had not been taken seriously, interpreting this association as a denial of her professional identity as a woman. She was aware of being involved in a deep-rooted conflict which is reduced to nationhood, culture and gender and interpreted it as if the organisational and societal system could not yet deal with the diversity represented. The system seemed to use her instead for simplifications and idealisations, as defence mechanisms—according to systems psychodynamic concepts (Cilliers and Smit 2006)—to overcome anxiety, uncertainty and anger in establishing how to deal with "the intruder" and the "new diversity" in the internationalising and globalising workplace. This seemed to Y to be a mirroring of the macro level of society which, at this time, also dealt with the uncertainty of how to construct a respectful inner diversity in the country and how to best handle global and international influences, competition and cooperation.

Realising the complexity of this situation, Y felt X's anger and his irritation at being pressured to deal with intercultural and interracial diversity within the department. He therefore projected his feelings onto Y, wrapped into the idealisation of being German. Y felt that he could not contain his (and the system's) anger and anxieties within this interpersonal, intercultural communication.

At the same time, Y encountered a projective identification, believing that the feelings of irritation, confusion and uncertainty were her own feelings. She experienced herself, and her methods of building work relationships, as a failure. Based on this assumption, she increasingly felt guilty, ashamed and irritated. These feelings

were strongly connected to the idea that her feelings were hers in the first place, while she was not able to comprehend why she would feel so strongly about her colleague's statements on German girlfriends. Y, therefore, went into a mode of avoidance and denial of the colleague (Stapley 1996), not actively seeking communication with this colleague but rather withdrawing unconsciously: "I never visited him in the office or made contact with him in departmental meetings. I just stayed away and went on with my work".

She believed that particularly the "German-ness" of her origin became an important image for X and that this was wrong; she felt like an "object based on nationhood, not like a professional colleague". In some of the conversations between X and Y, X associated "being German" with being "rich, technologically advanced, powerful and with ranging in the league of a global player". The German-ness therefore might have been unconsciously a symbolic figure (Cilliers 2017) for X, showing "advancement and a positive, higher status and a bright future".

X was also aware of Germany's past and war history which, Y believed, also made him associate German-ness with perpetuation and takeover. Therefore, X's projection onto Y of being an "intruder" in his department and society might have been unconsciously associated with the history of Germany and Whites in South Africa, according to Y's interpretation.

Through the idealisation and wishing for a German girlfriend, X showed, according to Y's interpretation, the idea of "including and integrating the perpetrator into his perspective, while striving to accept the White presence and reconcile with the history of white dominance in his country". Y even assumed that the wish for a German girlfriend included the wish for "increased power, dominance, supremacy and advancement within himself and in his work context".

As a German female who had grown up in post-World War II with numerous narrations of war, loss and trauma of the world wars, Y was very aware of topics regarding perpetuation, power, territory, authority and leadership, as well as connected feelings, such as anxiety, fear, shame, guilt and anger. Based on experiences of collective guilt in terms of her German origin, Y could not easily accept X's idealisation of Germany and his reductions of defining an ideal girlfriend based on nationality. Y was very critical of Germany and its past and felt very irritated by X's idealisation of her country of origin. She could not contain his idealisation owing to her own critical views on German nationality.

Further, she felt that X's statement about German girlfriends was "out of context", reducing the colleagues to gender roles and their relationship to gendered images. The conflict consequently began to assume the dimension of an identity-based conflict, including role confusion and reconstruction (Cilliers and Terblanche 2010). Y felt "disrespected in terms of the professional identity and reduced to gendered images, and as a potential German girlfriend". She believed that X's unconscious need to be in control of "his" department as a male South African lecturer was undermined by her presence "as a foreign professor". She imagined that "he feels inferior and even questions his own professional ability on a professional level, therefore denying my professional identity and reducing my role to my gender

identity” which might have impacted on the loss of professional boundaries (Cilliers and Koortzen 2005; Cytrynbaum and Noumair 2004; Naik 2014).

Y only established a “clear boundary when I clarified my status of being married”. This direct statement enabled X to realise that he had overstepped a professional boundary. Y narrates: “From this moment on he never talked about German girlfriends again”. She was surprised that she had to set this clear boundary, that he had not consciously recognised it before and that she had to “provide him with private information to stop him intruding my boundaries”. His overstepping of boundaries might, however, be a counterreaction of X experiencing Y (as representative of the collective of European/Whites) having overstepped his (African) boundaries constantly in historical and even contemporary perspective. This interaction therefore may have carried aspects of projection and projective introjection.

Although policies such as AA and BEE were in place, Y interpreted X’s behaviour as if he had viewed her employment, “although untenured, as a threat and competition and unaligned with BEE, increasing his uncertainties about the future management regarding cultural diversity and AA within the institution”. She felt that the societal South African conflict of the redefinition of interracial and intercultural relationships, with all its insecurities and anxieties, was transferred from the macro level of society into the organisational subsystem and the interpersonal system’s level (see Rice 1951).

Besides this unconscious transfer of macro-level dynamics into the work context, X’s question: “How is Germany?” over a period of 4 years made Y feel as if “a part of my South African life and identity was ignored and denied ... denying my being in South Africa and my inclusion as a colleague into the department”. Her personal, professional and South African identity was reduced to a German national identity. She felt that the complexity of her identity had been denied and simplified (Cilliers and Terblanche 2010).

She rationalised that this question about Germany was an act of “small talk” and that “he just wants to be nice and friendly”. No matter which rationalisation she found for his behaviour, however, she did not feel comfortable with it. Y also felt “irritation since I felt excluded as a foreigner”. She experienced their communication as a projected exclusion.

A split had not only occurred on the interpersonal and projected level but had also deepened on the intrapersonal level. Y started to experience “a split inside of me” (projective introjection), since she felt “more at home in South Africa than in Germany and I idealised my life in this country over the life I had left behind many years ago”. This situation contributed for her to reflect on cultural and social idealisations and denial.

Further, she said she was not prepared to contain “X’s anger of the past”, and she highlighted that she was not willing to take on the role of a symbolic parent nor as a protective force within the system as Kaplan and Lipinsky-Kella (2015) and Shongwe (2014) previously highlighted. Y felt that she was experienced as an element that unconsciously increased X’s feelings of anxiety, anger and uncertainty. The situation therefore became challenging and in the end manifested as an open

conflict (Aram et al. 2015; Armstrong and Rustin 2015) which both X and Y seemed to experience as a failure.

A few months later, Y responded in an interview as follows:

Today I met X at the car park when I arrived at work. I was quite surprised that he drives a German car. He asked me how Germany is (as usual) and when I will be returning to Germany—which was a new slant to our conversation! I told him that I'm planning to visit Germany, but I'm not sure when to leave for good since I enjoyed the work and the life here. He then asked if I had not watched the news and if I was not aware what was happening in the country? I asked him what he meant and he responded: "Did you not see that terrorism is now starting in South Africa?"

I knew that he referred to the arrest of two brothers who had planned to bomb a shopping centre, but who had been caught by the intelligence during the planning process. It had been on the news last night. "Oh", I said, a bit surprised about this statement which went far beyond our usual talk and I agree that this was unsettling.

He looked at me and said: "And this all happens because of you and your country where you are coming from. You people from Europe—you brought terrorism here!"

The statement and the aggression with which X stated his views left me in surprise, shock and confusion. I responded: "I'm not sure what you mean exactly, and I think it's a bit difficult to just refer to all European countries and connect my origin to this incident."

He turned around and left the conversation.

When I sat in my office, several arguments occurred to me why what he said was wrong, and why his behaviour was just inadequate. I wondered what had triggered this conversation. (At work, February 2016)

11.2.4.2 Terrorism

In response to media reports and the news, X seemed to be overwhelmed by anxiety regarding a new wave of crime, terrorism and external influence of power within South Africa. This was, according to Y, shown by "his reference to Europe and Germany as sources of terrorism in South Africa, linking this accusation to me personally when he said, 'you people from Europe'". X's growing levels of anxiety, powerlessness and paralysis, as explained by Sievers (2009), motivated new levels of defence mechanisms of generalisation and simplification, creating new layers of defence mechanisms (see Blackman 2004, and Stapley 1996, 2006). These new layers are analysed in the following paragraphs.

X first questioned Y's awareness of the political and social events happening in the country, showing his incredulity that she "was [still] in the country". Y interpreted this as an identity attack and as an expression of X's wish for her to leave, highlighting the new wave of insecurity, violence and terrorism as motivators. When Y responded by agreeing that the situation was "unsettling", thereby connecting to the thread of the conversation, aiming to show empathy, concern and solidarity, "I

was directly attacked as a representative of Europeans who had brought terrorism into South Africa”.

Y felt paralysed and confused, and reacted by rationalising this simplification, expressing her inability to comprehend his message, and used defence and denial as a defence mechanism. She was “overwhelmed by X’s accusation and aggression” and by the entire responsibility which she felt obliged to contain for the past. Through rationalising the statement, identifying the problem of simplification and using intellectual analysis, Y used defence mechanisms to defend herself against containing the anger, violence and aggression she experienced from X. She responded by criticising his simplification and rejecting the direct responsibility for terrorism in South Africa. At the same time, she realised that she felt collective guilt, anxiety, collective responsibility and shame for “parts of the German history and for the impact and consequences of European settlement in Africa”. However, she was very clear about the fact that she “refused to take on responsibility for Islamist terrorism in South Africa”.

Y felt an intrapersonal split through X’s projection of “collective guilt, shame and responsibility of Whites in general” which showed her own denial of her origin and the intra-psychological unwillingness to take collective responsibility of the actions taken in the past in her country of origin and in Europe. Apart from refusing to contain these collective responsibilities, Y rationalised and intellectualised the situation with her colleague at work. She rationalised that “colonialism, imperialism and apartheid have caused terrorist attacks in South Africa during the past, and anti-apartheid fighters have often been classified as ‘terrorists’ by the apartheid government”. Therefore, Y believed that the terroristic attacks stood in a relationship with the contextual past rather than with European settlement.

Y interpreted X’s accusation as: “X split the world repeatedly into Europeans or Germans as perpetrators, and South Africans as victims”. This simplified, split worldview into “good and bad” caused irritation and denial in Y as well as in X, who denied the complexity of the situation owing to overwhelming feelings of anxiety, anger and irritation anchored in the past. The experienced denial perceived by Y on both sides led her into feelings of incapability and failure to build up a “normal work relationship with X”.

During the past years, Y had increasingly witnessed a change in her colleagues’ perceptions of Europe which “seemed to dissolve the idealised image of Europe as a ‘haven for safety and security’”. In X’s accusation, this often idealised image of a “safe” Europe had also been deconstructed and changed into a “terrorist” Europe. This change from idealisation to devaluation was no longer holding a possibility of projection of safety and peacefulness, nor was the idealised image of the potential German girlfriend. The interpretation of Y was that the image of the ideal German girlfriend had changed into the projection and image of a supporter of terrorism. The defence mechanism of X splitting the world into “perpetrators and victims” might have helped him to deal with his collective and individual fear and anger within the context of changing global and local power dynamics.

The communication process of Y and X seems to be connected to anxiety and anger with regard to clashing African and Western perspectives within the specifi-

cally described context, referring to unresolved conflict (Janzen 2016). Different sociocultural and systems psychodynamic perspectives are reflected and are based on cultural intrapersonal, interpersonal and intercultural perceptions, interconnecting macro-, meso- and micro-level experiences within an interpersonal conflict situation.

11.3 Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to provide insight into a culturally embedded conflict experienced in the South African context, interpreted and discussed from a systems psychodynamic perspective, using an ethnographic single-case study approach, analysing an interpersonal conflict at work between two colleagues of different genders, cultures of origin and backgrounds.

During the entire conflict process, splitting, denial and rationalisation as systems psychodynamic elements were present. While X mainly used splitting, denial and projections, Y found herself in denial, rationalisation and intellectualisation. Underlying feelings of anxiety, anger and uncertainty on macro-, meso- and micro levels fuelled both intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict and led to engagement with systems psychodynamic mechanisms within the intercultural communication and conflict process.

The conflict represents layers of societal macro-level changes in post-apartheid South Africa, changes in perceptions of South Africa and Germany/Europe on macro levels and the impact of globalising influences and increase in international diversity in the workplace. These processes are reflected in the micro-level communication and contain feelings, thoughts and behaviours on different system levels to redefine power relations and equalise inequalities across system layers.

As Mahadevan and Mayer (2017) contend, in-depth analysis of conflict at the micro level is needed, since it entails new, in-depth and emic worldviews and shifts in perceptions of culture, power and identity. Analysis of shifts at this level can lead to changes in context-specific perceptions and power relations at work, based on a more diverse, differentiated and contextual understanding of sociocultural realities and their implications for power. This interpretation strengthens the argument of Syed (2008), and Syed and Özbilgin (2009), that further in-depth research is necessary to explore diversity and cultural phenomena and provide new information on intersecting communication levels of individuals holding different cultural perspectives. This can lead to a conscious understanding and a shift in cultural power relations through empathetic and mindful communication, in which individuals are aware of the underlying sociocultural and psychological phenomena in systems.

The findings show that simplified concepts and categorisations of African and Western contexts, and the power relations ascribed to them in the past, are now being challenged locally and globally. New dimensions of intrapersonal and interpersonal communication levels are being negotiated and created. The conflict situation described in this chapter represents the interlinkages of intrapersonal and

interpersonal conflict on various levels. The difficulty of resolving this conflict situation on a micro level leads to feelings of failure to build a functioning and harmonious intercultural work relationship between two colleagues of different origin.

This example of conflict shows that defence mechanisms are used when systems psychodynamics are overwhelming on different system levels and cannot be contained owing to the experience of overwhelming emotions such as anxiety, anger and uncertainty. High levels of anxiety and insecurity which are not contained or dealt with on a conscious, integrative level, and which are not taken on in terms of ownership and collective or individual responsibility, lead to splitting, projection, introjected projection, simplification, rationalisation and denial. The feelings appear to be disowned at different levels. They are not contained by governments (at the macro level) nor by departmental/organisational leadership (meso level) nor by individuals at the micro level. These feelings are consequently projected onto an element in the system, in this case Y, who seems—in the constellation of work relationships—to be a container for free-floating emotions in the context of diversity, change and power management. However, since the emotions could not be contained, the dynamics were experienced as personal failure on micro levels.

11.4 Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Future research needs to explore conflict and the experience of failure in specific cultural contexts and across cultures from systems psychodynamic perspectives. The analysis of individual, intrapersonal and interpersonal levels of conflict can support a deeper understanding of conflict across system levels and thereby contribute to create awareness, mindfulness and a deeper comprehensibility of unconscious intercultural conflict dynamics within organisations. Based on a deeper understanding of the dynamics, defence mechanisms can be identified and consciously addressed on a practical level. Employees in organisations should become aware and mindful of the complex interactions and relationships of the systems psychodynamics which might lead to conflict and the experience of personal failure within individuals of diverse backgrounds in organisations.

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