



<b>Title</b>	That Unwanted Feeling: A Psychodynamic Study of Disappointment in Organizations
<b>Authors(s)</b>	Clancy, Annette, Vince, Russ, Gabriel, Yiannis
<b>Publication date</b>	2012-12
<b>Publication information</b>	Clancy, Annette, Russ Vince, and Yiannis Gabriel. "That Unwanted Feeling: A Psychodynamic Study of Disappointment in Organizations" 23 (December, 2012).
<b>Publisher</b>	Wiley
<b>Item record/more information</b>	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/7516">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/7516</a>
<b>Publisher's statement</b>	This is the author's version of the following article: Annette Clancy, Russ Vince and Yiannis Gabriel (2012) 'That Unwanted Feeling: A Psychodynamic Study of Disappointment in Organizations' British Journal of Management, 23(4) : 518-531 which has been published in final form at <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2011.00780.x">http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2011.00780.x</a> .
<b>Publisher's version (DOI)</b>	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2011.00780.x">10.1111/j.1467-8551.2011.00780.x</a>

Downloaded 2023-03-15T17:09:45Z

The UCD community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters! (@ucd\_oa)



© Some rights reserved. For more information

# **That Unwanted Feeling: A Psychodynamic Study of Disappointment in Organizations**

Annette Clancy, Russ Vince and Yiannis Gabriel  
[Annette.clancy@ucd.ie](mailto:Annette.clancy@ucd.ie)

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the emotion of disappointment in organizations and develops a new line of theorizing inspired by psychoanalytic object-relations theory. Existing literature frames disappointment as a threat to organizational effectiveness, as both a response and an anticipation of failure and as an emotion that needs to be managed in order to prevent it from damaging organizational morale and performance. This only captures part of the complexity of disappointment and leaves unexplored its potential contribution to organizational and individual learning and even creativity. The paper develops a theoretical framework which depicts disappointment in three configurations or positions, and it establishes the potential of disappointment acting as an integrative emotion within organizations. The framework accounts for an apparent contradiction in organizational members' experience of disappointment – that it is, at the same time, seen as 'of little concern' to individuals, and yet viewed as capable of undermining stability and destroying positive feelings. The paper shows how disappointment is connected to the dynamics of blame in organizations but, when fully appreciated, can offer a way of moving beyond these dynamics by recognizing partial failure within an organization and turning it into the basis for organizational learning.

**Introduction** This paper explores the emotion of disappointment in organizational settings and begins to theorize its vicissitudes and ramifications for organizational life. Existing literature usually frames disappointment as a potential threat to organizational effectiveness and morale and as something that needs to be managed and controlled. We suggest that this captures only some of the complexities of disappointment in organizations and leaves unexplored its potential for creativity and organizational learning; it also flattens the dynamics and diversity assumed by disappointment in organizations. As emotional arenas, organizations frequently become terrains of disappointment for their members or arenas where disappointment merges with other emotions, such as shame, guilt and anxiety. We propose that not

only organization scholars, but managers, too, can learn much from disappointment, finding different ways of tolerating and learning from it, but also different ways of expressing it or containing its expression. We argue that disappointment confronts organizational members with the inevitability of imperfection (Schafer, 2003) and thereby presents them with a dilemma: how to negotiate imperfection within organizational settings that tend to emphasize positive emotion and behaviour as part of an organizational ideal.

There are two aspects to our contribution in this paper. First, we review and develop the literature on disappointment, highlighting existing approaches and reflecting on the potential importance of this subject as an emerging issue in the study of emotion in organizations. We use psychodynamic theory to inform the exploration of disappointment, and we identify a ‘paradoxical tension’ (Vince and Broussine, 1996) surrounding disappointment in organizations – the adverse impact of disappointment on perceptions of organizational stability frequently results in the curtailment of its public acknowledgement and expression. Extensive and chronic disappointment can be a threat to organizational stability and a deeply unsettling organizational emotion. It can also, however, be a potential source of creativity, learning and renewal. The second part of our contribution to knowledge is to construct a theoretical framework informed by psychoanalytic theory which disentangles different dynamics of disappointment and offers a way of assessing the threats and possibilities it poses to organizations. We develop a ‘suggestive theory’ of disappointment which can form the basis for future research. Suggestive theory is a contribution emerging from open-ended, qualitative inquiry aimed at pattern identification and evidence of new constructs (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). We propose that what we termed ‘the organization of disappointment’ unfolds in three ‘positions’ and that movement between the positions occurs in relation to how fantasy and reality are generated in organizational settings. Our framework is outlined in summary in Table 1.

**Table 1 The organisation of disappointment (initial summary)**

<i>Position 1:</i>	<i>Position 2:</i>	<i>Position 3:</i>
<b>I am disappointing</b>	<b>I am disappointed</b>	<b>I disappoint</b>

---

You are disappointed I do not live up to the expectations of other people.	You are disappointing Other people do not live up to my expectations of them	You disappoint I can tolerate disappointment
<i>Disappointment as failure of self</i>	<i>Disappointment as failure of other</i>	<i>Disappointment as loss</i>

---

Disappointment in organizations is often viewed as ‘problematic’ emotional orientation (positions 1 and 2). We argue that amore complex picture emerges when we include position 3, in which disappointment is re-imagined as loss and thereby can support the possibility of change (Marris, 1986). We suggest that the ‘splitting’ into good and bad which is characteristic of positions 1 and 2 promotes idealized and oversimplified relationships aimed at sustaining ‘a politics of imagined stability’ within an organization (Vince, 2002, p. 1192). ‘Imagined stability’ refers to a common fantasy of control and coherence, where organizational members behave as if organizations are the stable containers of rational decision-making and problem-solving. Organizations can be ‘taken in by their own fantasies’ (Gabriel, 1999) and are prone to idealized images unconsciously designed to protect their members from the potential destructiveness which emotions such as disappointment might unleash. Fantasies of a stable, omnipotent, error-free and even immortal organization, Schwartz (1987, 1990) has argued convincingly, constitute an organizational ideal which bolsters the narcissism of organizational members and strengthens their identification with it. Positions 1 and 2, we argue, aim to preserve the organizational ideal at all costs. Position 3, by contrast, locates disappointment not as the outcome of a split between good and bad organization aimed at sustaining the organizational ideal, but as the outcome of the conscious realization that splitting is itself a disappointing construct leading to a loss of those idealized images of coherence, stability and grandeur. This, we argue, opens up a potential for organizational learning and change. This view re-imagines disappointment in the context of organizational power relations, and shows how the organization ideal can become contested in different responses to disappointment. In summary, the third position in our model views ‘problematic’ behaviour as important information about the gap between fantasy and reality rather than as an attack on organizational stability.

Our argument is based on a study of in-depth interviews with 12 respondents from a variety of organizational settings. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the

respondents' experience of and response to disappointments encountered in their working lives. The patterns that we have identified suggest that disappointment is an important emotion in organizations, resulting from numerous contradictions of organizational life, and that it offers a point of departure for reflexive engagement with the limits of stability and control in organizations. In the concluding section of the paper, we highlight the systemic manifestation of disappointment and the connection between disappointment and 'blame culture'.

### **Theorizing disappointment: individual and organization**

Disappointment has been studied by a diversity of scholars in subjects ranging from economics and sociology to biology and psychology. It has been described as arising from a realization that 'the outcome of a choice would have been better had something else occurred' (Zeelenberg et al., 1998). It is generally viewed as a negative feeling for individuals within their organizations, linked to failure (Brandstatter and Kriz, 2001; Miller and Robinson, 2004; Schimmack and Diener, 1997; Zeelenberg et al., 2000) or as a defensive emotion against risk and uncertainty. It can thus anticipate failure, thereby reducing its felt impact. One way to cope with the uncertainty of decision-making is to maintain low but rigid expectations of likely outcomes (Zeelenberg et al., 2000) forestalling the potential of unpleasant surprises. Disappointment is thus connected with 'a pessimistic view about the future' (Bell, 1985, p. 1) justifying risk aversion and decision avoidance within organizations (Anderson, 2003; Loomes and Sugden, 1986; Van Dijk and Van der Pligt 1997; Van Dijk, Zeelenberg and Van der Pligt, 2003). In this way, 'irrespective of whether an outcome is favourable or unfavourable, the lower one's initial expectations the greater one's satisfaction or the less intense one's disappointment with the actual outcome' (Van Dijk, Zeelenberg and Van der Pligt, 2003, p. 507).

With some exceptions (Chandler, 2010), current literature generally casts disappointment as a negative or dysfunctional emotion in organizations, undermining morale, depressing expectations and justifying inaction and inertia. Disappointed individuals within organizations are seen as victims of circumstances which they perceived to be beyond their control; and the disappointed organizations are those caught in a spiral of chronic failure to deliver their mission, pessimism and sinking

expectations. We hope to show that the study of disappointment can reveal different possibilities, including those for learning and change; furthermore, because disappointment is a common and a complex emotion intimately linked to relations of authority and respect, power and subordination, it can greatly enhance understanding of the interplay between emotion and power in organizations.

Our own examination of disappointment in organizations is undertaken from a psychoanalytic perspective and, in particular, one that draws extensively on object-relations theory. Psychoanalytic literature emphasizes the centrality of unconscious processes and seeks to balance the view of organizations as rational entities with that of organizations as emotional and emotion-generating environments (Carr, 2001; Gabriel and Griffiths, 2002; Gould, Stapley and Stein, 2006; Hirschhorn, 1998; Stein, 2005, 2007; Vince, 2006). The use of psychoanalytic theories in organizations is well developed, and several distinct perspectives have started to emerge, relying predominantly on works by Freud, Klein and object-relations theorists, and Lacan and his followers (see, for example, Antonacopoulou and Gabriel, 2001; Arnaud, 2007; Brown and Starkey, 2000; Gabriel, 1991; Huffington et al., 2004; Jarrett and Kellner, 1996; Kets de Vries, 2004; Obholzer and Zagier Roberts, 1994; Seel, 2001; Stavrakakis, 2008; Vince, 2001, 2002).

The assumptions behind these perspectives and even the way in which the terms psychodynamic, psychoanalytic and object-relations are used are not always shared. The term 'psychoanalytic' is usually seen as the most inclusive term, although 'orthodox' Freudians may sometimes seek to exclude certain contended theories and traditions from it. The term 'psychodynamic' is often reserved for uses of psychoanalytic theories in understanding and intervening in group phenomena. The term object-relations is used to describe the tradition initiated by Melanie Klein, who viewed herself as orthodox, but became entangled in numerous arguments with Freud's successors. Her approach, which is the dominant one but not the only one informing this paper, emphasizes the formative impact of relations with others for the development of a person's mental personality, at the expense of Freud's own tendency to emphasize instincts and desires. Objects, in Klein's conceptualization, are symbolic entities, frequently the products of fantasies; they are invested with meanings and qualities and are capable of being integrated with or separated from the

self; they may be split, for example, into good and bad, and they can merge with other symbolic entities to generate new objects. Klein's approach, which dominated the British psychoanalytic establishment for the half century after Freud's death, subsequently influenced many authors who sought to explore group and organizational phenomena (for detailed description of the uses of these terms, see Gabriel, 2008, pp. 236–240). In spite of some enduring differences (which have, over time, tended to atrophy), there are core features that set psychoanalytic, psychodynamic and objectrelations perspectives on organizational phenomena apart from others. These include the following.

- Organizations are intensely emotional environments in which emotions frequently assume motivational qualities, including when they stand in opposition to rational considerations.
- Emotions are rarely located within a purely individual space and are inseparable from the ways in which power is exercised and contested.
- Unconscious as well as conscious processes and dynamics are central to an understanding of human systems and how they function. Many unconscious processes are rooted in early life experiences which later resurface as part of adult life.
- Individuals and groups perform tasks on behalf of the wider system, and we are always 'trading in assumptions' about what is real and what is not (Phillips, 2007).
- Anxiety and other intolerable feelings may be hidden from view through defences, some of which are individual and others social, i.e. institutionalized by organizations themselves (Bain, 1998; Krantz and Gilmore, 1990; Menzies, 1960).
- Action is as much the product of fantasy as it is of rational calculation (Gabriel, 2008). Frequently, fantasy and unconscious wishes loom behind actions and policies that are generally viewed as rational or instrumental.

The relationship between fantasy and reality is a central feature of psychodynamic approaches to organizations. Freud (1984) viewed humans as driven by unconscious and repressed desires. Central to his theories is the concept of loss – lost innocence,

lost desires and lost objects. Freud believed that, when hopes and desires are unavailable to us in our conscious lives, fantasy serves as a way of protecting them from being damaged by reality. Fantasy can be seen as a ‘wish fulfilling idea which comes into play when external reality is frustrating’ (Segal, 1991, p. 16). Fantasy is not, by definition, untrue, and some fantasies do indeed become realities: for instance, many an entrepreneurial venture starts off as a fantasy. However, the distinguishing features of fantasy as mental and social constructs are, first, that they are sustained by desire rather than ‘realistic’ considerations, second, that they maintain a link to unconscious processes at all stages, and third, that they are sure symptoms of a certain ‘lack’ or absence. Organizations may give the impression of being firmly rooted in reality, but fantasy is never far from the surface and assumes many forms – positive and negative. There are fantasies of grandeur and beauty, fantasies of annihilation and destruction, fantasies of achievement and renewal. Some of these fantasies are shared among numerous participants or set some against others, but they generally serve a purpose similar to that for individuals. Organizations build ideas and images of themselves in response to frustrating external (and internal) realities. Fantasies about good and bad, right and wrong in organizations help to generate self-imposed limitations on behaviour and action. They also act as triggers of particular emotions, ranging from pride to envy and from hope to disappointment.

### **An object-relations perspective on disappointment**

Organizations then emerge as creative and hopeful places at the same time as being sources of great anxiety (Gabriel and Carr, 2002). This raises an important question for organizational members: how can we sustain creativity in the face of fears and anxieties about failure and disintegration? We think that the study of disappointment can provide vital answers to this question. In particular, we think that studying the defensive mechanisms that have helped to construct disappointment as unwanted feelings as an irrational condition and as the avoidance of decisionmaking will reveal a different way of looking at the organization of disappointment. Our analysis is based substantially on Melanie Klein’s (1975) theories on early childhood (pre-Oedipal) experiences, which entails a special place for the role of disappointment. Thus, while several psychoanalytic perspectives may shed light on disappointment (including Freud’s theory of dissolution of illusions and Lacan’s theory of lack), the



analysis that follows is substantially inspired by Kleinian theory.

Klein identified two developmental positions, i.e. orientations that children adopt in infancy when confronted with a fundamental frustration of their desires and sustained experiences of loss: the paranoid/schizoid position and the depressive position. Each of these positions represents a way of relating to objects, as they are experienced in early life, and each of these positions may resurface in later life when, as adults, we experience loss, separation and anxiety. In the first position, the child has destructive fantasies that psychically attack external objects of desire, believing them to be bad because the child is unable to accept the existence of good and bad in a single object or person. This process of 'splitting' serves to protect the good while attacking the perceived threat from the bad. Thus, the child comes to experience a good breast and a bad breast, a good mother and a bad mother as separate entities. The depressive position, in contrast, is a later stage of development when the child recognizes the damage done by the attack, and experiences guilt and the desire for reparation. In this position, we are able to integrate the good and bad in others and ourselves, leading to a capacity to tolerate ambivalence, which Klein suggests is a central feature of development. Movement into the depressive position requires a lesser role for defences against anxiety. The bad is less bad, the good is less good (Gomez, 1997), and there is an inevitable sense of loss and a desire to repair what may have been damaged. Reparation is a creative act – imagining a different future requires a creative impulse in that 'we have to make up the future until we get there' (Phillips, 2006, p. 97). Klein linked the need for reparation with the creative impulse (Segal, 1991), as a need to demonstrate goodness and as a way of sublimating unwanted feelings. Disappointment, then, can be seen as a central feature of the depressive position, as an attempt at an integrative understanding of conflicting emotions. In this sense then, disappointment can move beyond a perceived failure of the self or a failure of the other: it can indicate a recognition of loss and a willingness to move beyond the primitive simplicities of the schizoid position.

Klein identified three defensive mechanisms, each representing a different way of relating to an object: projection, projective identification and splitting. Projection takes aspects of one's internal world and projects them onto an object with the aim of getting rid of uncomfortable inner thoughts and feelings. Projective identification

involves projection into another person, with the aim of keeping 'bad' parts of the self at a safe distance without losing them. The other person is influenced by the projection and starts to behave as though he or she is characterized by the projected thoughts and beliefs. Projective identification therefore creates a relational 'self-fulfilling prophecy', an intricate interpersonal dance that is mostly outside the awareness of those concerned. Splitting, or the separation of good and bad objects and feelings, is an aggressive impulse which banishes integrative desires and capabilities. In adults, splitting helps individuals to reject the complexity and contradiction in situations; to simplify them through separation. Therefore, it also serves as a way of creating distinctive boundaries and processes of control around situations that seem to be anxiety provoking (Ogden, 1986). While these concepts were designed to inform therapeutic intervention, they are also integral to everyday experience. For example, when we speak of putting ourselves 'in another's shoes', we are indicating an everyday aspect of the experience of projection. In summary, then, the key conceptual components that we take from psychodynamic theory to study disappointment in organizations are: the importance and complexity of the relationship between fantasy and reality; the potential for integrating good and bad in order to reduce defensive impulses; and the working of specific defensive processes, particularly projection, splitting and projective identification.

### **Research approach and methods**

An immediate issue facing researchers interested in disappointment in organizations is that it is problematic to separate out specific emotions in order to study them. Emotions are interconnected (Gabriel, 1999) and to focus solely on disappointment without linking it to other emotions, such as anxiety or anger, is not possible. In addition, not all disappointments carry the same meaning, value or impact for the individual; disappointment may be experienced and understood differently by different individuals; and while it is a common phenomenon within many organizations, it is one that may be systematically avoided or disavowed. The challenge, then, is to 'discover' different modalities of disappointment in organizational life, identify how people make sense of it and draw some conclusions about its potential impact on organizations. A further difficulty lies in the fact that an emotion may be denied or ignored in an organization, with this indicating that it is

absent – it could well be that such an emotion is repressed or disavowed, since its acknowledgement may represent a deep threat for organizational participants, or it could be that people have not developed narratives and stories through which to give a voice to this emotion.

After prolonged discussions, we opted to explore how particular individuals experience disappointment in their workplace. Undoubtedly, an ethnographic study focusing on specific organizations that have experienced collective disappointments or traumas would be interesting, but in this instance we decided to focus on the individual experience as the unit of analysis rather than the workplace. Twelve respondents from different organizational contexts were interviewed by AC, a professional with extensive experience in both consulting and psychotherapy. They included seven men and five women aged between 37 and 60, employed and self-employed, in for-profit and not-for-profit organizations and public-sector work environments. A list of the respondents is outlined in the Appendix. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Basic biographical data on respondents (age, gender, career to date, current role) were also collected. The starting point for the interviews was an invitation to each respondent to reflect on any experiences of disappointment in a work setting. Thereafter, each conversation took its own course, with the interviewer not seeking to ‘collect’ supposedly preexisting data, but encouraging and enabling the respondent to articulate their views and emotions on the subject. In this respect, ethnography was not the core method for generating field material, but the interviews were informed by some ethnographic principles seeking to enter the world views of participants and trying to identify the extent to which disappointment made part of these views, the ways in which it featured, the instances that occasioned it and its consequences.

Contemporaneous notes were kept during interviews and used to document the non-verbal and sub-textual content of conversations. The initial coding process, developed from the coding principles of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and informed by psychodynamic theory, was based on interview transcripts, researcher notes and reflections. Initially, we used an open coding strategy in order to generate a detailed map of the ideas emerging from the data. We then undertook selective coding in order to focus on the emotions expressed in the data, giving rise to a smaller number

of categories. In our final coding, we sought to identify the key issues for theory building. Three core findings emerged from this coding: first, that feelings of disappointment are processed before being publicly expressed; second, that disappointment is associated with anger projected onto others as blame or ambivalence whereby feelings are withheld from others; and third, that disappointment is bound up with conflictual feelings of failure – the tension from having to acknowledge failure in an organization at the same time as maintaining positive feelings towards the organization. The core category, the organization of disappointment, emerged from a combination of coding, mind mapping, conversations between the authors, previewing literature, writing and rewriting notes, listening repeatedly to the interview tapes and a good degree of daydreaming and fantasizing. Our approach, unlike grounded theory, did not seek to distil theory from ‘data’, nor did it seek to generate data by adhering to ‘prescribed methodological procedures’, but it tried to generate knowledge through ‘the unrelenting cultivation of theoretical ideas’ (Puddephatt, Shaffir and Kleinknecht, 2009, p. i). Table 2 presents the integrated theoretical position that we reached.

## **Discussion**

When qualitative researchers come to the conclusion ‘that’s interesting’, it is ‘a clue that current experience has been tested against past experience, and that past experience has been found wanting’ (Weick, 1989, p. 525). One of the results we found most interesting was a recognition among most of our respondents of how widespread disappointment can be in organizations, with a simultaneous assumption that disappointment is not dramatic or important enough to be acknowledged outside oneself; it is not a spectacular emotion, like anger, fear or envy, and does not present a major challenge for organizations. This assumption leads to some paradoxical conclusions: that disappointment is both prevalent and of no consequence to organizations; and that it is both of concern and yet of only personal interest to individuals. Paradoxes can be viewed as resources for theory building (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007) because they point to breakdowns or contradictions in understanding and thereby provide opportunities for transformations of understanding that are of theoretical interest.

Despite their view that disappointment is of no great organizational concern, respondents acknowledged that disappointment does not occur in isolation, that it is always connected to a set of internalized expectations generated in relationships with others. Such expectations are connected to power relations – expectations invariably differ, compete and are negotiated within a political environment. A psychodynamic perspective views emotion as ‘individually felt and collectively produced and performed’ (Vince, 2006, p. 348); viewed from this perspective, disappointment help us to understand better how individuals within organizations are performing an emotional task on behalf of the wider system expressing relations of power and subordination, control and resistance. Contrary to the views of our respondents, then, disappointment may be of concern to organizations, since it may undermine a carefully constructed vision, and destroy the positive feelings, replacing them with cynicism or detachment (Fleming and Spicer, 2003).

Our data suggest that there are three core aspects to disappointment in organizations. First, a significant finding is the degree to which the feeling of disappointment is being processed before it is publicly expressed or discussed. Disappointment is constructed as problematic personal experience because it is viewed as a potential threat to organizational stability and effectiveness and, therefore, tarnishes the organizational ideal. Second, despite individual perceptions, disappointment is being publicly performed in organizations by being transformed into anger (dumped on others) or aligned with ambivalence (withdrawn from others). These transformations remake disappointment in relation to more usual and legitimate feelings within organizations – blame and withholding. Third, disappointment arises when an expected positive outcome does not emerge. In other words, disappointment reveals a continuous tension in our experience of organizations: how to engage with inevitable failures in the organization at the same time as maintaining positive feelings about the organization in service of an ideal. These findings helped us to develop a model in the organization of disappointment, which differentiates three positions, depending on whether it results from what is perceived as a failure of the self, a failure of the other or whether it is acknowledged as the product of loss. We now turn to a more detailed discussion of the integrated model presented in Table 2.

**Table 2 The organisation of disappointment (elaborated conceptual frame)**

<b>Organisation of Disappointment</b>	<b>Quality</b>	<b>Unconscious Identification &amp; Emotional response</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Relation to the Organisation Ideal</b>
I am disappointing (Position 1)	I cannot say no. I live out the projection of the other	Shame Guilt Persecution Victim Impotence Resignation  Projective Identification Paranoid-schizoid position	Protects the external good object from being damaged by the internal bad object.	The organisation cannot tolerate itself as disappointing.  The individual contains the disappointment protecting the organisation ideal of 'not disappointing'.
I am disappointed (Position 2)	I have to live with the no of others. My fantasy is unfulfilled	Blame Rage Attack Potency Rejection  Projection Paranoid-schizoid position	Protects the internal good object from being damaged by the external bad object.	The organisation cannot tolerate itself as disappointed.  The individual contains the disappointment protecting the organisation ideal of 'not disappointed'.
I disappoint (Position 3)	Transference is dissolved and disappointment is tolerable	Risk Challenge Learning Acceptance I say the no I return the projection Depressive position	Integration of the good and bad within the self and others is tolerated	The organisation can tolerate disappointment.  The ideal of the not disappointing organisation is contested by containing disappointment within the system.

### **The organization of disappointment**

Position 1 (I am disappointing) results from perceived failures of the self, constructed from conscious feelings (I do not live up to the expectations of other people) and unconscious behaviour (I live out the projections of the other). Personal descriptions of this position from our data include 'letting colleagues down'; 'being unhappy with my own performance'; 'I wasn't good enough to get the contract'. However, such feelings are also connected to organizational dynamics: for example, that the

organization maintains: ‘an insatiable greed, demand, higher expectations all of the time for nothing . . .’ (Respondent 3). Such organizational dynamics reinforce individual feelings of disappointment and underpin increased expectations, both individual and organizational. There can be a strong fantasy in organizations that ‘we must move forward’ and that disappointment is in the way. The organization is unable to tolerate disappointment and, as a result, everything suffers from comparison and nothing satisfies (Schwartz, 2004). Individual members of the organization are aware of the contradiction and discomfort inherent in ideas such as ‘continuous improvement’ and ‘being the best’, but they still protect the organizational ideal of ‘not disappointing’: ‘It’s just a lot of fantasy talk about being the best . . . being world class, it’s a load of rubbish . . . do your best that’s about all you can do in anything’ (Respondent 3).

In position 1, the individual experiences him or herself as the object of disappointment and unknowingly acts out the role that has been assigned and adopted. In this position, the individual feels powerless in the face of external events. The stability of the organization is protected and defended by locating disappointment within the individual – which reinforces the fantasy that disappointment is personal and can be remedied by splitting the individual from the system in which the experience is generated.

Position 2 also represents personal behaviour as problematic, not only in relation to the self, but also in relation to perceived failures of the other (whether a person, object or desired future state). The other often does not live up to my expectations. Descriptions of this position from our data include: ‘I really had hoped to secure that promotion’ (that they didn’t give me); ‘I imagined this would be a completely different working environment to my previous job’ (it is just as bad, if not worse); ‘the boss simply didn’t live up to my expectation of her’. Emotions such as anger, blame and rejection reinforce personal feelings of disappointment. The individual experiences him/ herself as disappointed and may blame and attack the external source of disappointment. In position 2, disappointment with the other’s rejection of my desire and with their perceived failures is again turned inwards in the service of protecting the organization, of sustaining a fantasy of the organization that does not disappoint. The individual therefore has to contain the disappointment so that the

organization ideal (the organization that does not disappoint) can be maintained. For example:

The worst thing is to wish for something and then to get it . . . where you think something is going to be different to what you have already been doing and then you get there and it's pretty much what you've been doing before.  
(Respondent 9)

We think that the experience of Respondent 9 (a senior human resource manager) represents a common feeling of being disappointed with and within organizations. She desires a position that (in fantasy) represents a better future, only to discover on arrival that it feels much the same as before. She gets what she wants and she does not get what she wants at the same time, and she blames herself for wanting it in the first place ('I should have known'). Positions 1 and 2 both lead to individual confusion in terms of how disappointment can be managed in a satisfactory way. In particular, position 1 promotes self withdrawal, and position 2 promotes blame. Both positions split good and bad in ways that encourage attempts to reduce the impact of disappointment within and on the organization.

Position 3 involves a more complex understanding of the way in which disappointment is contained within the system. The attachment to fantasies of both satisfying and disappointing objects are relinquished: good and bad, satisfaction and disappointment, are seen as component parts of relating and organizing. This suggests an ability to tolerate the loss of the fantasy of 'what should be' and to re-imagine a future where disappointment is tolerable. A central feature of the third position is the capacity to return projections and not to act out a pre-assigned role. Part of the reality of moving to the third position is the recognition that damage is inevitably done to self and others within organizations and that acts of reparation offer a way of ensuring that relationships generating disappointment are not permanently damaged. For example:

I remember at one point being in charge of a pitch and losing the thing – and I remember the head guy coming up



and he said – ‘that was really good work – you did your best’. And that really helped – and also the empathy of him saying ‘of course you must be really disappointed’. Whereas in the other case I’m thinking of the guy came back from a failed pitch and said ‘the creatives let us down’, it really was like a kick in the stomach to everybody.  
(Respondent 7)

Respondent 7, a self-employed marketing and communications consultant, experiences an integrative response to disappointment from her boss. Disappointment is not managed out of the system in which it originates but, rather, it is acknowledged and contained. The realization that ‘I disappoint’ is both a common and an acceptable organizational experience, allowing the individual to recognize that he or she cannot live up to the idealized expectation of others and others cannot live up to his or her idealized expectations of them. The splitting into ‘all good’ and ‘all bad’ by locating disappointment in self or other is now recognized as a disappointing construct, and the loss of this idealization is experienced. ‘I disappoint’ is associated with the depressive position, which Klein (1940) describes as containing two sets of feelings – the first are ‘persecution and the characteristic defences against it’ and the second ‘sorrow and concern about the feared loss of the “good” objects’. She also suggests (quoting Freud) that the primary way of overcoming this state of mourning is by ‘the testing of reality’ (p. 126). The loss and mourning of the idealized relationship contains the hope of a more realistic way of relating, in which disappointment is tolerable and understood to be a component part of relating.

The first two positions create defensive ways of managing disappointment through self withdrawal (I am disappointing) or blame (I am disappointed). Position 3 contests this splitting as a defensive response which sustains a fantasy of organizational stability. When split and located between positions 1 and 2, private feelings of disappointment manifest as potentially destructive public emotion (e.g. anxiety, anger, ambivalence and blame). Position 3 suggests a need to recognize good and bad objects in ourselves and others, thereby contesting the fantasy that emotion can be satisfactorily organized by making it only an individual or personal phenomenon. Allowing disappointment to be present within the organization

encourages the integration of good and bad, and reframes disappointment as tolerable rather than damaging. The association between disappointment and damage is assuaged through everyday acts of reparation: picking up the phone to offer feedback; finding a way to say sorry; making time to ensure the relationship between colleagues can survive not winning a contract.

The organization ideal (as all good or all bad) is contested by position 3 in that the ability to tolerate both good and bad in self and other becomes bearable. In contesting the fantasy of a stable and perfect state encapsulated in an organizational ideal, the third position also contests the fantasy of the disappointing object. The implied invitation is to view the organization ideal and disappointment as relational concepts – generated and contained within the same system. Freud reminds us that desire is in excess of an object's capacity to satisfy it (Freud, in Phillips, 1993) – the inability to meet demand or not be satisfied by what one attains is constructed as failure, thereby reinforcing the attachment to the fantasy of perfection and the inevitability of disappointment.

Disappointment is complex and confusing primarily because our desires are unconscious, sublimated, frequently contradictory and redirected towards satisfaction. In order to feel disappointed, we must have a fantasy of the fully satisfying object or an assumption that there is there is an experience to be had entirely free of disappointment. But if we are to be desiring subjects, we can only experience desire in its absence (i.e. reality is not perfectly in harmony with our desires). In this way, disappointment ensues, whether a desire is frustrated (and reality is blamed for this) and whether a desire is fulfilled, since such fulfilment does not bring about the hoped for eternal bliss and harmony. The way, therefore, to temper disappointment is by finding ways of desiring that are satisfying or 'good enough' and without being perfect. Balancing a life lived and a life desired is difficult work. If we are disappointed, we are trying to be in two places at once and not living in the (emotional and political) complexity of the organization. It is then not by defending ourselves against disappointment, but by discovering creative ways of fulfilling desire and sublimating potentially threatening feelings that we can overcome disappointment. This, then, is the paradox of disappointment – only by acknowledging it as inevitable can we overcome it.

## **Conclusion**

Some emotions seem to have particular importance in relation to organization and organizing because they can be associated with recurring patterns of behaviour, action and inaction. For example: defensive routines emerging from anxiety (Argyris, 1990); the organizational dynamics of envy (Stein, 1997); and the function of blame in reinforcing political boundaries between sub-systems (Vince and Saleem, 2004). This paper suggests that disappointment represents another emotional 'keyword'. As an emotion that expresses a failure to meet expectations and to live up to an ideal, disappointment can taint relations between subordinates and superiors, teachers and pupils, leaders and followers, opening the way for possible blaming, recrimination and scapegoating, dynamics that may surface in the course of appraisals, evaluations, feedback sessions and so forth. In this manner, disappointment can be an attempt to dissociate oneself from failure, and blame it or attribute it exclusively to the other, recapitulating the dynamics of the paranoid-schizoid position and split between good and bad objects, such as good and bad pupils, good and bad teachers, good and bad employees and good and bad managers. Yet, our data suggest that disappointment does not always feature as the result of such splits, as the result of a failure of the self or failure of the other. It can also be an emotion that helps organizational members engage with apparent contradictions of organizational experience and to cope with the tension between fantasy and reality. These insights have two important implications for an understanding of organizational theory and practice. First, the study of disappointment can provide a necessary critique of the 'positive turn' in organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton and Quinn, 2003). Such thinking serves the fantasy of a perpetual sunny side of organizational life where negative emotions can be conquered, eliminated or, worse, managed. However, as Fineman (2006) points out: 'positive scholars' quest for positive change and learning is likely to be a truncated, single-loop mission if the stress, anxiety, anger, pessimism and unhappiness of life and work are silenced or marginalized' (p. 281). Similarly, the cynical and blaming stance enjoyed in different ways by managers at all hierarchical levels of organizations is equally unlikely to facilitate the desired quiet life. Second, our study of disappointment

revealed a paradox: disappointment is experienced as being of little concern to organizations at the same time as having a strong emotional impact. This paradox helps us to appreciate a shift in our understanding of the connection between emotion and politics (power relations) in organizations. Disappointment is of concern to organization members because it is feared that negative emotions will undermine stability and destroy positive feelings. In other words, the strong impact of disappointment means that it is an emotion that must not be allowed (much) expression in the organization. To summarize the psychodynamics of disappointment in organizations: disappointment is constructed as problematic personal behaviour so as not to be a threat to organizational stability. It is reconstructed as blame and withdrawal to make it more familiar and acceptable. It is deconstructed through positive feelings in order to cover over inevitable problems and failures in the organization. The paradox which we have identified concerning disappointment in organizations challenges existing perceptions and provides an initial frame work for future thought and inquiry. Our work connects with scholars from different theoretical backgrounds who are interested in the importance of disappointment to an understanding of managerial power relations (Chandler, 2010). It also connects with the scholarship published in this journal on emotion and management, whether this involves the role of emotion: in determining managers' perceptions (Daniels, 2003); in shaping entrepreneurial behaviour (Goss, 2008); in influencing managers' strategic choices (Delgado- Garcia, Fuente-Sabaté and Quevedo-Puente, 2010); and in relation to managers' ability or inability to learn from their experience (Vince, 2010). The work that we have done so far raises some research questions for the future study of this topic. What we are learning from the study of disappointment is that it is connected to the dynamics of blame in organizations in ways that we had not previously imagined. Acknowledging the connection between disappointment and blame may allow us to transform organizational members' experience of 'blame cultures'. One reason why the expression 'blame culture' is such a widespread description of organizational experience is not only to do with an impulse to protect oneself (or the members of a group) by projecting failure onto others. It is also about the inability to integrate failure within the organization. The idealization of the organization as a stable and coherent entity with a clear mission and positive perspective on the future means that failure has to be located with individuals or groups. Failed organizations seem only to be retrospective, the result of bad

leadership, poor decisions or the inability of senior managers to mobilize change. However, failure, as much as success, is an everyday experience of organizing at all levels. Taking risks, making something different happen, leading change all imply the possibility of both success and failure – often at the same time. Future study of these dynamics will need to investigate in more detail why some emotions in organizations (blame) seem to be widely expressed, while others (disappointment) go largely unnoticed. If blame is seen as a legitimate expression of feeling in organizations, but disappointment is not, this implies the need to understand better why some emotions and expressive forms dominate in organizations and others do not (Hoggett and Thompson, 2002). A second area for future research arises from this. As yet, we have only studied the perceptions of individuals within the organization. We have not yet studied specific organizational contexts within which the collective dynamics of disappointment are enacted. In taking our research forward, we need to ask how our theory can be applied at the group level within different organizational contexts. We suspect that an analysis of group level behaviour in relation to disappointment can provide us with results that will make a stronger contribution to management practice than we have been able to identify from our initial study. Finally, while organizational members fear the possible damage of failure, they are also likely to be changed by loss. We have begun to reposition disappointment in organizations as a discourse of loss as distinct from failure. We think that engagement with disappointment can ‘unsettle’ assumptions and practices (Cunliffe, 2009) and thereby promote reflexive engagement with the limits of stability and control in organizations. This means viewing disappointment as a process that is linked to the potential to learn and to change. Disappointment as failure sustains a fantasy of a stable and satisfying object. Disappointment as loss challenges this idea and asks us to rethink both our need for stability and the satisfaction that may be achievable. At the point at which we experience disappointment, we have already begun the process of testing reality, and this suggests that disappointment is the beginning, not the end, of a process of learning and discovery. The relationship between disappointment and learning will be an important area for further research. It may be the case that part of the learning inherent in disappointment is the recognition of limitations (Craib, 1994), both individual and organizational. Disappointment confronts us with the inevitability that our desires may be unrealistic and that our task may be to ‘find the new ways of wanting that keep wanting alive’ (Phillips, 2006, p. 19). A re-imagined

relationship with disappointment would mean that experiences may not be satisfying, they may just be real, and some types of satisfaction may have to remain imaginary. We think that such a perspective will help organizational members to tolerate disappointment, and to support organizations in engaging with systemic failures and imperfections.

### **Appendix: Pilot Study Respondents**

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Age and Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
1	45 year old man	Training and development manager at a university
2	43 year old man	Self-employed business consultant
3	55 year old man	Self-employed psychotherapist and organisational consultant
4	44 year old man	Actor
5	37 year old woman	University lecturer
6	55 year old man	Chief executive officer of an equality organisation
7	50 year old woman	Self-employed marketing and communications consultant
8	60 year old woman	Psychologist
9	37 year old woman	Director of human resources
10	40 year old woman	Curator at a national cultural organisation
11	37 year old man	Joint artistic director of a theatre company
12	37 year old man	Joint artistic director of a theatre company

## References

- Alvesson, M. and D. Kärreman (2007). 'Constructing mystery: empirical matters in theory development', *Academy of Management Review*, 32, pp. 1265–1281.
- Anderson, C. J. (2003). 'The psychology of doing nothing: forms of decision avoidance result from reason and emotion', *Psychological Bulletin*, 129, pp. 139–167.
- Antonacopoulou, E. and Y. Gabriel (2001). 'Emotion, learning and organizational change: towards an integration of psychoanalytic and other perspectives', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 14, pp. 435–451.
- Argyris, C. (1990). *Overcoming Organizational Defences*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Arnaud, G. (2007). 'Power and organizational work: Gerard Mendel's socio-psychoanalysis', *Organization Studies*, 28, pp. 409–429.
- Bain, A. (1998). 'Social defences against organizational learning', *Human Relations*, 51, pp. 413–429.
- Bell, D. E. (1985). 'Disappointment in decision making under uncertainty', *Operations Research*, 33, pp. 1–28.
- Brandstatter, E. and W. C. Kriz (2001). 'Hedonic intensity of disappointment and elation', *Journal of Psychology*, 135, pp. 368–380.
- Brown, A. and K. Starkey (2000). 'Organizational identity and organizational learning: a psychodynamic approach', *Academy of Management Review*, 25, pp. 102–120.
- Cameron, K. S., J. E. Dutton and R. E. Quinn (2003). 'Foundations of positive organizational scholarship'. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton and R. E. Quinn (eds), *Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a New Discipline*, pp. 3–13. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Carr, A. (2001). 'Understanding emotion and emotionality in a process of change', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 14, pp. 421–436.
- Chandler, J. (2010). 'Women and men as managers: the importance of disappointment', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 17, pp. 590–611.
- Craib, I. (1994). *The Importance of Disappointment*. London: Routledge.
- Cunliffe, A. (2009). 'Reflexivity, learning and reflexive practice'. In S. J. Armstrong and C. V. Fukami (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Management Learning, Education and Development*, pp. 405–418. London: Sage.
- Daniels, K. (2003). 'Asking a straightforward question: managers' perceptions and managers' emotions', *British Journal of Management*, 14, pp. 19–22.
- Delgado-Garcia, J. B., J. M. de la Fuente-Sabaté and E. de Quevedo-Puente (2010). 'Too negative to take risks? The effect of the CEO's emotional traits on firm risk', *British Journal of Management*, 21, pp. 313–326.
- Edmondson, A. C. and S. E. McManus (2007). 'Methodological fit in management field research', *Academy of Management Review*, 32, pp. 1155–1179.
- Fineman, S. (2006). 'On being positive: concerns and counterpoints', *Academy of Management Review*, 31, pp. 270–291.
- Fleming, P. and A. Spicer (2003). 'Working at a cynical distance: implications for power, subjectivity and resistance', *Organization*, 10, pp. 157–179.
- Freud, S. (1984). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Collected Works*, Vol. 11. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Gabriel, Y. (1991). 'Organizations and their discontents: a psychoanalytic contribution to the study of organizational culture', *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 27, pp. 318–336.
- Gabriel, Y. (1999). *Organizations in Depth*. London: Sage.
- Gabriel, Y. (2008). *Organizing Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Gabriel, Y. and A. Carr (2002). 'Organizations, management and psychoanalysis: an overview', *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 17, pp. 348–365.
- Gabriel, Y. and D. S. Griffiths (2002). 'Emotion, learning and organizing', *The Learning Organization*, 9, pp. 214–221.
- Goss, D. (2008). 'Enterprise ritual: a theory of entrepreneurial emotion and exchange', *British Journal of Management*, 19, pp. 120–137.
- Krantz, J. and T. Gilmore (1990). 'The splitting of leadership and management as a social defence', *Human Relations*, 43, pp. 183–203.
- Glaser, B. and A. Strauss (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Gomez, L. (1997). *An Introduction to Object Relations*. London: Free Association Books.
- Gould, L., L. Stapley and M. Stein (2006). *The Systems Psychodynamics of Organizations: Integrating the Group Relations Approach, Psychoanalytic and Opens Systems Perspectives*. London: Karnac Books.
- Hirschhorn, L. (1988). *The Workplace Within: The Psychodynamics of Organizational Life*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.
- Hoggett, P. and S. Thompson (2002). 'Towards a democracy of the emotions', *Constellations*, 9, pp. 106–126.
- Huffington, C., D. Armstrong, W. Halton, L. Hoyle and J. Pooley (2004). *Working Below the Surface: The Emotional Life of Contemporary Organizations*. London: Karnac Books.
- Jarrett, M. and K. Kellner (1996). 'Coping with uncertainty: a psychodynamic perspective on the work of top teams', *Journal of Management Development*, 15, pp. 52–66.
- Kets de Vries, M. F. R. (2004). 'Organizations on the couch: a clinical perspective on organizational dynamics', *European Management Journal*, 22, pp. 183–200.
- Klein, M. (1940). *The Writings of Melanie Klein, Vol. 1*. London: Hogarth.
- Klein, M. (1975). *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921–1945*. London: Hogarth.
- Loomes, G. and R. Sugden (1986). 'Disappointment and dynamic consistency in choice under uncertainty', *Review of Economic Studies*, 53, pp. 271–282.
- Marris, P. (1986). *Loss and Change*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Menzies, I. E. (1960). 'A case study of the functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety: a report on a study of the nursing system in a general hospital', *Human Relations*, 13, pp. 95–121.
- Miller, M. and C. Robinson (2004). 'Managing the disappointment of job termination: outplacement as a cooling-out device', *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 40, pp. 49–65.
- Obholzer, A. and V. Z. Roberts (1994). *The Unconscious at Work*. London: Routledge.
- Ogden, T. (1986). *The Matrix of Mind: Object Relations and Psychoanalytic Dialogue*. London: Karnac Books.
- Phillips, A. (1993). *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Phillips, A. (2006). *Side Effects*. London: Harper Perennial.
- Phillips, A. (2007). Interview with the author. Personal communication. London.
- Puddephatt, A. J., W. Shaffir and S. W. Kleinknecht (2009). *Ethnographies Revisited: Constructing Theory in the Field*. London: Routledge.
- Schafer, R. (2003). *Bad Feelings*. London: Karnac Books.
- Schimmack, U. and E. Diener (1997). 'Affect intensity: separating intensity and frequency in repeatedly measured affect', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, pp. 1313–1329.
- Schwartz, B. (2004). *The Paradox of Choice, Why More is Less: How the Culture of*



Abundance Robs Us of Satisfaction. New York: Harper.

- Schwartz, H. S. (1987). 'Antisocial actions of committed organizational participants: an existential psychoanalytic perspective', *Organization Studies*, 8, pp. 327–340.
- Schwartz, H. S. (1990). *Narcissistic Process and Corporate Decay: The Theory of the Organizational Ideal*. New York: New York University Press.
- Seel, R. (2001). 'Anxiety and incompetence in the large group: a psychodynamic perspective', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 14, pp. 493–504.
- Segal, H. (1991). *Dream, Phantasy and Art*. London: Routledge.
- Stavrakakis, Y. (2008). 'Peripheral vision, subjectivity and the organized other: between symbolic authority and fantasmic enjoyment', *Organization Studies*, 29, pp. 1037–1059.
- Stein, M. (1997). 'Envy and leadership', *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 6, pp. 453–465.
- Stein, M. (2005). 'The Othello conundrum: the inner contagion of leadership', *Organization Studies*, 26, pp. 1405–1419.
- Stein, M. (2007). 'Toxicity and the unconscious experience of the body at the employee–customer interface', *Organization Studies*, 28, pp. 1223–1241.
- Van Dijk, W. and J. Van der Pligt (1997). 'The impact of probability and magnitude of outcome on disappointment and elation', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 69, pp. 277–284.
- Van Dijk, W., M. Zeelenberg and J. Van der Pligt (2003). 'Blessed are those who expect nothing: lowering expectations as a way of avoiding disappointment', *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 24, pp. 505–516.
- Vince, R. (2001). 'Power and emotion in organizational learning', *Human Relations*, 54, pp. 1325–1351.
- Vince, R. (2002). 'The politics of imagined stability: a psychodynamic understanding of change at Hyder plc', *Human Relations*, 55, pp. 1189–1208.
- Vince, R. (2006). 'Being taken over: managers' emotions and rationalizations during a company takeover', *Journal of Management Studies*, 43, pp. 343–365.
- Vince, R. (2010). 'Anxiety, politics and critical management education', *British Journal of Management*, 21, pp. 26–39.
- Vince, R. and M. Broussine (1996). 'Paradox, defence and attachment: accessing and working with emotions and relations underlying organizational change', *Organization Studies*, 17, pp. 1–21.
- Vince, R. and T. Saleem (2004). 'The impact of caution and blame on organizational learning', *Management Learning*, 35, pp. 131–152.
- Weick, K. (1989). 'Theory construction as disciplined imagination', *Academy of Management Review*, 14, pp. 516–531.
- Zeelenberg, M., W. Van Dijk, A. Manstead and J. Van der Pligt (1998). 'The experience of regret and disappointment', *Cognition and Emotion*, 12, pp. 221–230.
- Zeelenberg, M., W. Van Dijk, A. Manstead and J. Van der Pligt (2000). 'On bad decisions and disconfirmed expectancies: the psychology of regret and disappointment', *Cognition and Emotion*, 14, pp. 521–541.