

**Bob Townley**

**Love, loss and leaving in Organisations: there's no emoticon for that!  
Exploring criticality in relation to a psychoanalytically-informed study of loss  
and mourning in organisations**

**Abstract**

Arguments have been made for the criticality of a psychoanalytic approach to the study of management and organisations. Arnaud (2012: 1124) contends that a psychoanalytic approach “brings a new sense to meaning” to organisational research by shining a light on unconscious processes and allowing researchers into deep, largely uncharted, territories such as matters of life and death; becoming ‘critical’ in that this approach allows a “re-examination of what is accepted as obvious”. Fotaki, Long and Schwartz (2012: 1106) draw attention to the role of psychoanalysis in organisation studies as a “*critical theory with wide explanatory powers...arguably the most advanced and compelling conception of human subjectivity that any theoretical approach has to offer.*”

A link can also be made to ‘critical realist’ research design in that this approach seeks to determine ‘generative mechanisms’, that are not directly accessible to sense experience, and to apply a process of ‘retroduction’ in order to explain presenting phenomena within organisations (Reed, 2005: 1635). The paper will describe the similarities with this approach, with reference to a psychoanalytically-informed study of defences against anxiety in an organisational context (Menzies, 1960).

Examples of the application of the critical approach in psychoanalytically-informed research, exploring largely uncharted territories in organisations, include studies of vengeance (Sievers and Redding Mersky, 2006), betrayal (Krantz, 2006), toxicity (Stein, 2007), envy and leadership (Stein, 1997) and loss and mourning (Hyde and Thomas, 2003 and Gabriel, 2012).

Building on my own PhD research, I want to take this exploration into the domain of love, at the heart of human (and organisational) life, and its agonising counterpart, loss. These are core issues in psychoanalytic theory, in that they are central to the human psyche, and inextricably linked.

According to Freud (1930: 81) we become vulnerable to the consequences (and fear) of loss from the first moment of forming relations with an external love object, which *“makes love the centre of everything, which looks for all satisfaction in loving and being loved.”*

According to Klein (1963: 301) we are formed by the irretrievable loss of our first love object which creates a desire to make reparation (1946: 16) *“to regain and build up again the good and complete breast which he had once possessed and lost.”* Klein’s work (1944: 110) also stresses that successful mourning can be a healing and creative force in the face of loss, allowing the possibility that *“hatred has receded and love is freed.”*

My aim is to explore the criticality – *the new sense of meaning, the explanatory power, the potential to re-examine the seemingly obvious* – in my own early (psychoanalytically-informed) research with an organisation in a state of transition and trauma, where issues of love, loss and leaving have already surfaced.