

**TITLE OF PAPER:**

**“It’s a Dog eat Dog World Out There!” Competition, Collaboration and Consulting**

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**Key words:**

**Systems Psychodynamic Consulting, competition, collaboration**

**Abstract:**

*“It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there!”* said one of my interviewees when asked to comment upon a paradox that had emerged during my first round of interviews with the 20 consultants who self-selected as working with a systems psychodynamic approach. While at least 18 of the 20 asserted that working with other consultants was important, if not crucial, when taking this approach, at the time of interviewing, only two consultants were working with someone else or had immediate plans to and all twenty were set up in business as sole practitioners. He went on to say, *“The whole collaboration thing – that is enormously difficult ...it’s a bit hard to admit that one’s prone to envy and competitiveness isn’t it?”*

The aim of this presentation is to share and explore the findings from my PhD research to date. The focus of my research has been to study as ethnography both the experience of consulting with a systems psychodynamic approach and what I have come to describe as the ‘community of practice’ of consultants ‘working in this way’ in Australia. Collaboration and competition are emerging as central themes. In Australia, this work has been referred to by many as socio-analysis or the Bion/Tavi approach (Bain, 1999, Bain, 2000). I have chosen to use the name systems psychodynamics as defined in Gould et al (Gould et al., 2001) “an interdisciplinary field which attempts to integrate the emerging insights of group relations theory, psychoanalysis, and open systems theory”. I have also adopted this approach as my research method.

The thinking of Wilfred Bion (Bion, 1961, Bion, 1970) has permeated and underpins the evolution and development of our systems psychodynamic approach. His comment, “We like to think that our ideas are our personal property, but unless we can make our contribution available to the rest of the group there is no chance of mobilising the collective wisdom of the group which could lead to further progress and development” (Bion, 1980) speaks to the ideal and the sense in working in collaboration; both with each other and with our clients. From our psychoanalytic roots, in particular, object relations theory (Mitchell, 1991, Bion, 1970, Krantz and Gilmore, 1990), we know we can be prey to being ‘caught’ in a ‘parallel process’ (Berg and Smith, 1985, Hirshhorn, 1990, Alderfer, 1987). It is both the experience of this and the collaborative working through that often brings the richest understanding of our clients’ experiences and therefore the greatest chance of a successful consulting intervention. There seems little argument against the merits of collaboration in consulting, so what sense can be made of its evident lack?

From what the consultants I interviewed reported, competition, both real and imagined, has a major role to play in inhibiting collaboration: *“I know I’ve had many feelings of competitiveness and it raises anxiety in me both in terms of feeling competitive, but also what provokes that which is a fear of not surviving or not getting sufficient work”*. Is it possible that both the perceived and real ‘hatred’ of systems psychodynamic work in the client/market system fuels this anxiety about survival at quite primitive levels and in turn heightens competition? It was interesting that only the dark side of competition was ever raised for discussion in the interviews.

In this session, I would like to both share my research findings and invite people to bring their own anecdotal evidence of their consulting experiences of both competition and collaboration. In this way, we might attempt to collaboratively explore the issues as well as learn from our experience in-the-moment of what part feelings of competitiveness play.

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Audio Visual Requirements:

My preference would be to work in a room in which the chairs can be in a circle without any tables in the way.

Flip Chart and coloured markers