Transcending Polarization: Beyond Binary Thinking

Jack Denfeld Wood and Gianpiero Petriglieri

Abstract

Human life is an emotional roller coaster, and when confronting emotionally charged events, individuals, groups, and larger collectivities instinctively frame their predicaments in a binary way—as a polarity encompassing a dimension of choice with two mutually exclusive alternatives. Events are thus construed as dilemmas to be resolved in favor of one alternative or the other. However, the inherent tension leading to polarization conceals an important developmental opportunity, if we "hold" the tension long enough to permit exploration, differentiation, and resolution by a third, "mediating" element. In this article the authors explore the regressive (defensive) and progressive (developmental) functions of the archetypal human propensity to polarize. The neural underpinnings and the psychology of binary thinking are considered followed by an examination of the dialectical patterns found in various schools of psychotherapy and the ways in which they represent attempts to harness the energy of polarization for healing and growth.

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Dualism represents an ancient pattern of perception and thought. Dictionaries of ancient symbols (e.g., *Herder Dictionary,* 1993) note that "numerous phenomena support a dualistic view of the world, such as the opposites of creator and created, light and shadow" (p. 206). We humans have apparently always possessed the tendency toward psychic dualism. We speak of the "opposites" of day and night, spirit and matter, good and evil, male and female, and so on. Even celestial objects—for example, the sun and moon or Mars and Venus—have long been portrayed as opposites. Whether the physical structure of the cosmos is fundamentally dualistic or whether this apparent dualism is an artifact of the human psyche is an open question. Looked at psychologically, however, these external objects may simply be the canvas on which the structure of the human psyche paints its own designs.

The Neural Underpinnings of Binary Thinking

Research on the neurology of human emotions has shed some light on the nature of this inherent dualistic psychological pattern. According to LeDoux (1994, 1996), any stimulus entering our central nervous system is immediately relayed in two directions. One pathway makes the information available to the cerebral cortex, which mediates cognitive, logical processing and precise recognition. A second pathway carries the information toward the amygdala, a tiny but crucial subcortical structure mediating an emotional reaction to the object under scrutiny. The cortex and the amygdala are activated at about the same time. However, the amygdala decides whether we like the object or not (and often initiates a behavioral response) before the cortex has even managed to figure out what the object actually is, and long before we are allowed the luxury of a conscious thought or conscious feeling.

In other words, our brain gives an emotional label to each object as "good" or "bad" even before we cognitively grasp what that object is. "Visual information is first processed by the thalamus, which passes rough, almost archetypal, information directly to the amygdala. This quick transmission allows the brain to start to respond to possible danger" (LeDoux, 1994, p. 56). The "quick and dirty" emotional assessments we are hardwired to make—by genetic design—might be binary and reductive, but they also make the world predictable and allow for instantaneous, lifesaving action. "Emotional responses are, for the most part, generated unconsciously," concludes LeDoux (1996, p. 17). So, evolution has selected and conserved the neural machinery that supports instinctive "good or bad" binary thinking, largely because of its survival value.

While we all possess the potential for archaic emotional reactions, it is not always helpful to be possessed by them. Often survival is not at stake, and an instantaneous reaction can get us into trouble. The human brain is equipped with features that permit an alternative to this archaic, instinctual mode of functioning. Thanks to a specific two-way neural pathway, the cerebral cortex can dialogue with the amygdala and exchange information *if* the emotional reaction is not overwhelming. The cortex can then access the amygdala's nonverbal and noncognitive data; and the amygdala, in turn, receiving further and finer information from the cortex, can modulate its activity accordingly. When the energy of our emotional reactions is not discharged through automatic behavior, it is available as fuel for further exploration and learning. In other words, when emotions do not jump-start an instinctual chain of reactions bypassing the cortex, they can provide the "drive" to focus our efforts toward ever-finer understanding and better adaptation to a fluid environment. When the brain reacts in a binary way, it leads to quick, irrational decisions and action; when a dialogue is engaged between the emotional and rational parts of the brain, the "tension of the opposites" stimulates a more sophisticated exploration of the environment and furthers subsequent individual development.

Looked at in this way, binary thinking is much more than a risk-avoidance mechanism: It is the necessary springboard for progress and the development of individuals, groups, and ultimately the species.

The Psychology of Binary Thinking

For the individual, at an intrapsychic level, the process of decision making typically begins with the choice among alternatives—usually between two alternatives. Should I marry or not, should I take a new job or stay with the old one, should I shop today or not, should I buy the white soap or the pink one? The choice is a binary one, "this" or "that," between two alternatives lying along a single dimension, and it quickly acquires an emotional tone when we begin struggling to decide which option is "right" and which is "wrong," which is "better" or "worse," which is one is "good" and which one

is "bad."

Reducing complex phenomena or choices to a binary set of alternatives is part of human nature, a fundamental mechanism deeply engraved in our nervous tissue and passed on from generation to generation for our survival. But it can continue to exert an archaic hold on us beyond its usefulness if it prevents us from looking beyond the polarity of "opposites."

We can see this archaic mode of thinking especially clearly with topics that evoke a strong emotional reaction. We hear that Americans are good and our enemies are evil. We say that men are from Mars and women are from Venus (Gray, 1993) (i.e., that they are opposites). We argue that "girls have better language skills than boys" (or do not) or that "boys are better in math than girls" (or are not) (Moir & Jessel, 1992). We fall into the habit of speaking in dualistic categories—in part for linguistic convenience, of course, although we say this sort of thing so often that we can come to believe that reality is defined by two mutually exclusive categories.

This tendency to consider differences not simply as variations but as opposites reveals how quickly our thinking can regress to the markedly archaic mode manifested so clearly in childhood development. Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1959/1985) defined this form of psychic functioning—splitting the world into good or bad, friends or foes, "like" and "do not like"—as the paranoid position. For preverbal children, still incapable of dealing with ambivalence and complexity, splitting internal and external objects into all-good or all-bad—and acting accordingly—is an irrational yet helpful way of simplifying and managing reality, at least in childhood.

We carry memories of preverbal images and feelings of "good and bad" with us our whole lives, and they are difficult to communicate, particularly the more traumatic ones. Articulating them to others presents difficulties. Berne (1947/1957) argued that "one reason people do not remember much of what happened to them before the age of three is that most adult thinking is done with words or at least with images of things that have names. People all have unnameable feelings about unnameable things, and usually don't understand where they come

from. These may refer to the period of life before the individual could use words" (p. 106).

When things become "nameable" we begin to differentiate and to categorize logically. One could argue that the development of our minds from childhood through adulthood follows a pattern of increasing differentiation in our thinking. With increasing differentiation comes a need to structure, that is, to organize, classify, order, and regulate the objects, processes, and concepts that have been first articulated by "this" and "that." Intelligence may essentially be the general measure of our capacity to make numerous, ever-finer, multidimensional distinctions of the reality around us, and within us—to transcend "binary thinking" and our elementary tendency toward dualism.

When we are small children, we first see in broad categories: We see plants and animals, big and little. Later we begin to make finer distinctions: We see trees and birds, bushes and fish, evergreens and leafy trees, large white swans and small black crows, whales and sharks. Still later we see red pines, white pines, spruce, and hemlock; bald eagles, red falcons, pigeons, and doves; yellow perch, white perch, bass, and brook trout.

If botany or biology becomes our hobby or profession, we make even finer distinctions, until eventually our relationship to our hobby or profession reveals to us characteristics that we are unable to express in words or communicate easily to others. The distinctions of which we become increasingly aware surpass our capacity to express them in language. If it is relatively easy for us to agree on the structural differences of trees or birds or fish, it is substantially more difficult for us to agree on the meaning of love or responsibility or justice.

As we develop, then, the difficult search for adequate words to communicate to others may not simply reflect repression or our inability to relate satisfactorily the events we have experienced as preverbal infants and toddlers, as Berne suggested. The difficulty in expressing ourselves may also reflect increasing differentiation; that is, we move beyond the capacity of everyday language to express adequately to our contemporaries the distinctions of which we are becoming aware. In such cases, where lack of words fails to support our expression of finer

understanding and increasing differentiation, symbolic images and the language of metaphor can help bridge that gap. The language of dreams, poetry, myth, and fairy tales is not simply literary affectation; it is an attempt to approach and grasp frustratingly evanescent intuitions. And it is this language that finds its way into the psychological consulting room.

The Dialectic and Psychotherapy

Most psychodynamic theories employ, consciously or unconsciously, some sort of dialectic schemata, and it is helpful to consider the philosophical ancestry of the formulations we employ daily to make sense of our clients and ourselves.

For millennia, philosophers and historians have extolled the virtues of conflict. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) claimed that the dialectic was the overriding philosophical principle, and it became the central idea of his system of historical development and change. The dialectical process requires discrimination of differences, which leads to tension and conflict. It appears to be a linear and transformative process. Hegel's dialectic articulates a theory of change and implies that progress is made by sequentially resolving a series of emerging conflicts. Thus, a thesis suggests its antithesis, and the conflict is resolved by a synthesis of the two; this new synthesis, in turn, becomes a thesis, suggesting a new antithesis, which in turn becomes resolved in a new synthesis, and so on.

British philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell (1959/1977) remarked that "the dialectic method is inspired by one other feature that comes from an observation of history. For it emphasises the aspect of struggle between opposing forces. Like Heraclitus [540-480 BC], Hegel greatly values strife" (p. 248). In amplifying Hegel's use of the dialectic as a philosophical principle of first importance, Russell (1977) noted that virtually all "intellectual development follows a similar pattern. In this aspect the dialectic goes back to the interplay of question and answer of Plato's dialogues. *This is precisely how the mind works when confronted with a problem*" (p. 250, italics added). In other words, Russell was saying that the dialectic process occurs not only on

the historical and social levels but on an intrapsychic level as well; it is the way we think as we attempt to make conscious decisions when solving problems.

It is inevitable that an archaic process that is as central to human historical and philosophical thinking as the dialectic would find its expression in social and psychological theory. If we turn to consider the theories of Freud, Berne, and Jung, we find in the work of each an attempt to fashion a way to transcend the polarity and conflict inherent in individual—and collective—life.

The familiar psychic structure in Freudian theory includes the id, ego, and superego, where, within the regulatory dynamic of the psychic economy, the ego is "caught in the middle" and attempts to balance the demands of the id and superego, the pleasure and reality principles, and, at another level, the competing instinctual demands of Eros and Thanatos or of libido and mortido (Berne, 1972).

Analogously, Berne included a tripartite arrangement of ego states in transactional analysis: Parent, Adult, and Child. Berne was occupied with ego states—that is, with states that are, at least potentially, conscious—and he repeatedly argued against the suggestion that Parent and Child ego states possess characteristics identical to those of the superego and id of Freud (Berne, 1957/1977a, pp. 131-132; 1958/1977b, p. 148). Whereas for Freud it is the ego that attempts to manage the tension between external and internal demands, between id and superego, and between erotic and destructive impulses, for Berne it is the Adult ego state that attempts to manage the semiautonomous internal dynamic, permitting the Child and the Parent to have their place and play their roles without, however, abdicating responsibility and permitting them free rein. From our perspective, Berne's model of ego states is alive in a way that Freud's is not: One can see, feel, and recognize the shifts between ego states. In this way, Berne's working theory may be less a formulation that emulates Freud's than it is another expression of the more fundamental archetypal influence of the dialectic.

In Berne's (1957/1977a) method, structural analysis is the recommended first step of psy-

chotherapy, during which the primary task is to work on identifying and reinforcing well-delineated boundaries between the client's Adult ego state, archaic Child ego states, and acquired Parent ego states as well as reducing and eventually eliminating areas of overlap (contaminations) among the three. Berne argued that the "doubly 'purified adult ego state' could stand aside, as it were, and watch the continuing battle between the 'child' and the 'parent' with greatly increased objectivity and clarity: an advantageous therapeutic position" (p. 128; note that this was written before Berne began capitalizing Parent, Adult, and Child). That is, this process involves finding and reestablishing a solid third point of leverage for psychological development. Having achieved this, the therapist can help the client establish "adult control" and then proceed to the analysis of current conflicts among the three ego states (Berne, 1958/1977b, p. 149).

Berne did not argue that the job of the Adult, or of the therapist, is to eliminate this tension. On the contrary, he suggested that the starting point for therapeutic work, and the basis for healthy psychological functioning, is to establish a clear tripartite structure incorporating the conflict and reinstating a triangular dynamic— with the Adult cast in the middle of conflicting forces as a solid "third point"—to manage that tension purposely and affect development and change.

In both Freudian psychoanalysis and transactional analysis theory, then, the third element in the healthy personality—ego and Adult—functions more or less successfully as a sort of mediator; on the other hand, in an unhealthy personality, this third element is severely hampered by, or contaminated by, or even overwhelmed by, one of the other two elements. Whereas Berne's therapeutic approach initially drew on psychoanalytic theory in the formulation of structural analysis and transactional analysis, as he turned his attention toward articulating the social pastimes, games, and life scripts we live, he increasingly drew on fairy tales, myths, and symbols elaborated by Carl Jung and his associates.

The psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung was one of Freud's contemporaries—and at one point his designated "Crown Prince"—un-

til their difficult break. Readers may be indirectly familiar with Jung through the use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a personality questionnaire based on his ideas. It was Jung, for example, who first introduced the words "extravert" and "introvert." But Jung's work went well beyond describing personality types. He shed light on the universal nature of the archetypes—those fundamental patterns found in all human societies in all times—and he recognized the tendency of polarization as a manifestation of psychic development.

Jung (with Jaffe, 1966/1983) thought that being fully human meant to be forever tossed between conflicting forces. "Just as all energy proceeds from opposition, so the psyche too possesses its inner polarity, this being the indisputable prerequisite for its aliveness, as Heraclitus realised long ago" (p. 379). Getting "caught in the middle" between two opposing forces is the very human dilemma made famous by the classical image of Homer's Odysseus, who was trying to steer his ship between the sea monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis in the Strait of Messina. This is a personification of the conscious dilemma we face as human beings: caught between opposites, between the alternatives of "this" and "that."

Under favorable conditions, the "tension of opposites" gives rise to an intrapsychic dynamic regulating three elements: a principle of polar extremes and a third, intermediate balancing principle. Jung (1966/1983) continued, "Thesis is followed by anti-thesis and between the two is generated a third factor, a lysis which was not perceptible before" (p. 384). Psychic development is not the only outcome possible when one is caught in the middle, of course. There are four possible outcomes in a conflict characterized by a dialectical pattern of thesis and antithesis: (1) a complete split or dissociation of the opposing positions, that is, the end of a connection or relationship; (2) a complete overcoming of the opposition, essentially, annihilation of one position by the other; (3) the possibility that no significant change takes place and the positions remain in a more or less stable relationship of continued strife; or (4) synthesis, which is identical to neither of the two original conflicting positions but emerges from

the tension and includes elements from both.

In this sense, individual healing and growth depends not on the avoidance of tension but on the maintenance of it for developmental work to continue. This is not only a feature of individual decision making and development. We can see this timeless archetypal movement reflected in the structure and dynamics of the basic unit of collective life and decision making: the small group.

The Dialectic in the Small Group

German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918) considered the dyad the fundamental relation of social life. Similarly, he observed that there was a tendency in larger social aggregates for the emergence of a polarization into two parts, and he noted that during "periods of excitement," social collectivities split and polarize into two hostile camps—the one side positive (our side) and the other negative (the other side). One can see evidence of Simmel's observations on the national political scenes of various countries today as well as within organizations in transition. Polarization was not, Simmel felt (1950), restricted to large social aggregations. "In a similar way, every lively movement within a group—from the family through the whole variety of organisations based on common interests, including political groups—generally results in the differentiation into clear-cut *dualism*" (p. 144, italics added). Anyone who has lived in a family or worked in a group has experienced such a schism.

Whether in clinical, educational, or organizational settings, when differences and disagreement invariably emerge, groups frame conflict in binary terms, and the relatively stable subgroups of members are mobilized to represent each end of that polarity, often paralyzing the group. Group members caught in a polarized group, fueled by feelings of frustration, with a crippled capacity to communicate rationally, will typically resort to attempts to overwhelm the "opposing side" with arguments and data while at the same time undermining them with political maneuvering.

The most acute case of polarization in a group occurs with scapegoating, when a single group member assumes—and is unconsciously assigned—the job of voicing a deviant posi-

tion, while the rest of the group argues the "opposite" side. Sills (2003) explains that this particular dynamic of "role lock" may be less pathological than it appears if we consider it as the group's initial attempt to address a difficult existential concern or an emotionally charged topic. Seen this way, the position of the scapegoat becomes fundamental: keeping the decision-making process open and the group vital long enough to potentially save the group from static conformity and "groupthink" (Janis, 1982).

"Healthy" groups are not those that avoid conflict and never fall prey to binary thinking and polarization. This is impossible in any case and would arrest progress and development even if it were possible. Rather, healthy groups are those that allow a third element to emerge. With the arrival of a third element, the dynamic shifts from a binary one to—at least potentially —a more balanced and inclusive one. With the third element in place, a relatively stable informal structure is established—as is a dynamic process among the three elements, a sort of "developmental organ." For development to occur, the group needs to incorporate the capacity to harness the energy produced by polarization and use it to transcend binary thinking in favor of more sophisticated forms of decision making when dealing with internal and external realities.

A typical view of polarization within group dynamics sees the group's regression to an "archaic" emotional level as a negative symptom, and so therapists, consultants, and managers may then be drawn to prevent or suppress it. But one can also view polarization as the group's attempt to articulate the conflict where the tension really exists—below the level of rational argument in an emotional field—in order to move things forward. The enactment of such "archaic" behavior then permits the group to develop a common language, a "mythology" that can provide, if deciphered, a framework with which to understand the group's current concerns (Woods, 2003) and transcend the polarization.

The dialectic tension conceals the potential for higher levels of functioning and deeper levels of understanding. The tension can lead to any of the four outcomes discussed earlier: dis-

solution of the group, one subgroup imposing its view on the other, a stalemate, or a synthesis of the two polarities and progression to a subsequent dialectic. In most legal decision making, the judge or arbitrator determines which of the first three outcomes is achieved. For synthesis to occur, on the other hand, some third element needs to incorporate and balance the tension of opposites, mediating and facilitating its generative function. This third element might emerge internally—that is, a third individual or subgroup unwilling to take either side at face value or willing to work with aspects of both—or it could be "imported" from the outside, for example, with the arrival of an external consultant as mediator rather than as an arbitrator or judge. If the conflict were fundamentally a rational one, the decision-making process could proceed in an Adult manner. But given that the principal characteristic of a polarity in group conflict is the high emotional charge, the risk of the external consultant assuming the role of scapegoat is virtually inevitable. In such a condition, the appeal to rational intellectual arguments is fruitless. The third element—subgroup, consultant, or therapist— must draw on the language of the emotional field. It is only by attending to the underlying "language of symbol" that dissociation, complete dominance, or stasis can be avoided. Symbols play a central psychological role in the regulation and development of the individual and collective psyche; they operate as a sort of bridge, reconnecting and reassociating the conscious and unconscious domains. That is why symbols hold such a central place in religion, dreams, myths, and fairy tales—and in psychotherapy and group consultation.

Transcending Polarization: The Role of Symbols

The dynamic of "duality and transcendence" has been captured by symbolic imagery across centuries and civilizations. Joseph Campbell (1988) offers a beautiful description of this eternal movement as portrayed in a sacred Indian cave located on an island in Mumbai harbor. The cave is filled with eighth-century statues, and the central statue is of a tripartite face some 6 meters high and 6 meters across.

Flanked on either side of the central figure are two other faces, one male and one female. Campbell remarked:

> The central head is the mask of eternity—this is the mask of God. That is the metaphor through which eternity is to be experienced as a radiance. Whenever one moves out of the transcendent one comes into a field of opposites. These two pairs of opposites come forth as male and female from the two sides. One has eaten of the tree of knowledge—not only of good and evil, but of male and female, of right and wrong, of this and that, of light and dark. Everything in the field of time is dual: past and future, dead and alive, all this—being and nonbeing, is and isn't. The mask represents the middle and the two represents the two opposites. They always come in pairs and put your mind in the middle. Most of us put our minds one the side of the good, against what we think of as evil. It was Heraclitus, I think, who said, "For God, all things are good and right and just. . . ." You're in the field of time, when you're man, and one of the problems of life is to live in the realization of both terms. That is to say, I know the center, and good and evil are only temporal apparitions. (Min. 9' 20")

In our roles as therapists or consultants for individuals, groups, or organizations—or in the course of exercising leadership within our own groups and organizations—it is by maintaining the integrity of a third position that we have the possibility of fashioning a synthesis from the inherent conflict of binary thinking. Like Freud's and Berne's triadic structures of ego, superego, and id and Parent, Adult, and Child, Jung's work rests implicitly on a dialectic foundation, with the role of the third, mediating element assigned to "the transcendent function" of a unifying symbol (Jung, 1957/1986b). Jung's transcendent function describes a triangular dynamic wherein the symbol bridges the schism between conscious and unconscious domains. It seems to us that Jung's accent is less on a tripartite structure than it is on a tripartite process that offers the possibility of transcendence—of rising above a simple duality and potentially creating something at least partially new.

For growth and development to occur, individuals, groups, and larger collectivities caught in a dilemma must maintain the tension and grapple with it. As Jung (1957/1986b) put it,

> The shuttling to and fro of arguments and affects represents the transcendent function of opposites. The confrontation of the two positions generates a tension charged with energy and creates a living, third thing—not a logical stillbirth in accordance with the principle *tertium non datur* but a movement out of the suspension between opposites, a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation. The transcendent function manifests itself as a quality of conjoined opposites. So long as these are kept apart—naturally for the purpose of avoiding conflict—they do not function and remain inert. (p. 189)

The psychotherapist or the group consultant can help facilitate the process and play much the same role—midwife—as Socrates played in Plato's dialogues. The therapist, so to speak, puts himself or herself on the side of the third element—helping mediate its function—be it Freud's ego, Berne's Adult, or Jung's symbol (Berne, 1957/1977a; Jung, 1957/1986b, p. 74). On the other hand, if the therapist is unaware of—or unable to work with—the symbolic and dialectical nature of the psyche at sufficient depth—that is, to serve as a bridge between conscious and unconscious domains—then clients risk being stranded and left with superficial moralistic advice on what the collective conscious considers "good" and "bad" instead of being supported in the necessary work of engaging their polarized psyche and synthesizing the conflict within.

> The ego keeps its integrity only if it does not identify with one of the opposites, and if it understands how to hold the balance between them. This is possible only if one remains conscious of both at once. . . . Even if it were a question of some great truth, identification with it would still be a catastrophe, as it arrests spiritual development. Instead of knowledge one then has only belief, and sometimes that is more convenient and therefore more attractive. (Jung, 1954/1986a, p. 219)

In summary, to allow individuals and groups to explore their moments of polarization—instead of being destroyed or paralyzed by them—the mediating element needs to perform a twofold function: first, letting the client hold the tension for a sufficient period of time in order to explore the finer and finer distinctions of the issue provoking the polarization, and second, translating the suggestions provided by the emerging imagery and symbolic material. In this endeavor, it is the therapist's job to put himself or herself on the side of the mediating element—whether one considers that third element the ego, the Adult, or the symbolic image that potentially reconnects and heals the split between unconscious and conscious domains.

Conclusion

Whether we consider the physiology and psychology of individual decision making or the pattern of group and collective decision making, the process begins with a tendency toward binary thinking and polarization. The tension of opposites provides the energy for ever-finer differentiation—when that tension is mediated within a dialectical process. The dialectic is an ancient, higher-order process that informs the progressive development of individuals, groups, organizations, and civilizations. It is inevitable that the dialectic also informs the nature and practice of psychotherapy. Polarization is essential—provided that we do not stop there, but allow the archaic process of binary functioning to lead to the emergence of a mediating third element.

Jack Denfeld Wood, Ph.D., American, is professor of organizational behavior at the International Institute of Management Development (ICD) in Lausanne, Switzerland, and a psychotherapist in private practice. He is completing his training in analytic psychology at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zürich, Switzerland. He is a Regular Member of ITAA and a member of the A. K. Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems. He can be reached by email at wood@imd.ch .

Gianpiero Petriglieri, M.D., Italian, is visiting professor at the Centre for Executive Learning and Leadership, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark, and a psychiatrist and psychotherapist in private practice. He is currently ITAA vice president of research and innovation. He is a member of the A. K. Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems and the National Training Laboratory (NTL) Institute for Applied Behavioral Science. He can be reached by email at ginpet@tin.it .

Dr. Wood and Dr. Petriglieri collaborate in leadership development, group dynamics, and psychotherapy. Their current research focuses on unconscious processes in individuals, groups, and organizations.

Please send reprint requests to Dr. Wood at IMD, 23 Chemin de Bellerive, 1001 Lausanne, Switzerland; email: wood@imd.ch .

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