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On the psychodynamics of hope and identity in times of crisis: why they are needed when basic assumption victimism/supremacism prevail

Claudia Nagel

ABSTRACT

In times of crisis uncertainty and insecurity rise and lead to heightened anxiety and fear. To overcome these emotions, hope and identity are needed. In this article I would like to explore the psychodynamics of hope and identity, the role they play in overcoming crisis, how they are connected in good and in bad times, and how leaders can create real hope and real identity. My major point will be that hope and identity are linked via fear and containment—in defensive and destructive ways, forming both fake hope and fake identity and in constructive healthy and healing ways, improving the well-being and functioning as well as performing of individuals, organisations, and societies. I will show that the crisis also induces a new basic assumption (BA) mentality which I have already called in earlier papers “victimism”, and which I will develop further here with the addition of supremacism. Victimism/supremacism as basic assumption mentality in the sense of Bion are critical in understanding the development of prevailing larger phenomenon such as populism, the rise of authoritarian leaders, identitarian movements, identity politics, and similar developments. Leaders need this knowledge to move beyond the BA V/S mentality and the crisis into hope and the future.

Keywords: victimism/supremacism, organisational hope, organisational identity, authentic leadership, basic assumption mentality.

Introduction

In times of crisis, people suffer not only from the crisis itself, that is, experiencing illness, death, losing jobs, social contacts, status etc., but also from the inherent uncertainty and insecurity. Both stem from the extreme changes we expect and not knowing what the future holds. Not knowing how society, politics, economics, and organisations will develop or whether we will manage the climate crisis creates widespread fear and anxiety—on the individual as well as the organisational level. On both levels people need hope and identity to overcome the fear. Once (re)discovered, they will stabilise and reinforce themselves and each other.

In this article I would like to explore why that is, their psychodynamics, the role they play in overcoming crisis, and how they are connected in good and in bad times. My major point will be that hope and identity are linked via fear and containment—in defensive and destructive ways, forming both fake hope and fake identity and its constructive healthy and healing ways, improving the well-being and functioning as well as performing of individuals,

organisations, and societies. This knowledge will help us to overcome the crisis on organisational as well as societal and political levels, where it induces a new basic assumption (BA) mentality which I have already called “victimism” (Nagel, 2020, 2021). I will develop it further in this article with the addition of supremacism. Victimism/supremacism is critical in understanding the development of larger phenomenon such as populism, the rise of authoritarian leaders, identitarian movements, identity politics, and similar developments. The phenomenon of this newly discovered BA victimism/supremacism picks up on the call for papers for this twentieth anniversary special issue. By reflecting on the reason for recent social developments, that is, authoritarianism and populism, it also links the individual with the organisational/societal world via the central notion of containment.

In the first part I will introduce the concepts of hope and identity at the individual and then at the organisational level. Afterwards I will explore the linking pin, that is, containment and the ramifications if this linking pin is missing. In the second part I will look at the consequences when the linking pin fails, what we can observe as a result, and how we can overcome the negative developments.

PART ONE

Basic psychodynamics of hope and identity

Individual and organisational hope

The ambivalence of hope—is it good or bad—is best described with the story of Pandora’s box. Pandora is said to have been given a box Zeus had filled with all the possible evils in the world being angry with men because Prometheus had stolen the fire from heaven. Out of curiosity, she opened the box and sickness, death, and a host of other evils slipped out, until she managed to close the lid—only hope remained in the box. One of the key questions is, had hope to be stored away safely from or for humankind?

Hope is indeed not only an ambivalent but also a complex construct, ubiquitous in all human and social sciences, in art, literature, music, religion, philosophy, and of course psychology. Numerous definitions exist, and most of them refer to hope as future-oriented, positive, containing something to be desired, and an expectation to achieve the desired. It comprises agency (goal-orientation), trust, and the capacity to plan to meet the goals (e.g. Callina et al., 2018; Hopper, 2001; Snyder et al., 2018).

Snyder, one of the first psychological theorists on hope and a positive psychologist, defines hope:

as a cognitive-motivational state characterized by strong agency and pathways thinking that provides high-hopers with the motivational determination and cognitive tools to successfully pursue their goals. (Callina et al., 2018, p. 9)

The psychoanalyst Hopper gave a broader definition which is more useful from a psychodynamic perspective, stating:

that “desirous expectation” is the common denominator of them all [the definitions, author’s add]. In essence, “hope” conveys an attitude of optimistic trust that the desirous expectation will be satisfied, but tenacity, determination and fortitude are also involved. Hope is a way of feeling, thinking, behaving and relating to the self and others. (2001, p. 210)

The last sentence best describes the multiple appearances hope has. The way of feeling, thinking, behaving, and relating is not determined or stable over time, hope can thus be developed as well as be lost, depending on self and life circumstances.

Hope is important in times of crisis characterised by high uncertainty and unsafety. Hope helps us survive both physically and emotionally. Hope is, as the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2018) puts it, the flipside of fear (see also Kast, 1991)—also playing an important role in moments of crisis. Hope and fear have some aspects in common: both evaluate the outcome as very important, both include great uncertainty about this outcome, and some lack of control (sometimes even passivity). The major difference is the focus: fear focuses on the potential bad outcome and hope focuses on the potential good outcome that may occur. Fear and hope are thus connected.

Hope development

On the individual level, hope develops from earliest childhood onwards. Erikson (1968) links the development of hope directly with the development of identity, and understands hope as a “vital virtue, an active quality and inherent strength” (p. 233). The very first phase of childhood culminates in the child’s idea of “I am what hope I have and give” (ibid., p. 107), stemming from the development of a basic sense of trust of others as well as a sense of one’s own trustworthiness. As attachment theory teaches us (e.g. Spitz, A. Freud, Bowlby), children need their caregivers for bonding which then creates trust and gives security, safety and protectedness—an emotional state which in German is called “Geborgenheit” (Kast, 1991). This is why Kast says: hope is the basal “basic trust” of the human being—“Grundgeborgenheit”—who cannot live without it. Disrupted attachment by a prolonged separation from a caregiver demonstrates that the loss of hope, shown by an empty gaze and silent resignation, is the most severe casualty for a child. It develops when crying and protesting were not having an effect and impacts negatively the relationship-building capacity in later life (Bowlby, 1988; Grossmann & Grossmann, 2004). The psychic mechanism which creates “Geborgenheit” is containment.

Organisational hope

The concept of organisational hope (OH) was omitted from the discussion in organisational sciences until the more recent subjects of positive organisational behaviour (POB) (e.g. Luthans & Avolio, 2009), positive organisational scholarship (POS) (e.g. Cameron & Caza, 2004) appeared. Both are based on Seligman’s ideas of positive psychology which came up in the early 2000s (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). OH is:

an indispensable source of energy for collective activity ... It is an affirmative form of social discourse through which communities of people (1) generate new images of possibility for social relationship and (2) mobilize the moral and affective resources necessary to translate image into action and belief into practice. (Ludema et al., 1997, p. 1027)

In this seminal overview article, Ludema et al. develop a textured vocabulary of hope and conclude:

... throughout history hope has displayed four enduring qualities that have allowed it to remain one of the most important factors contributing to the health and the vitality of human communities: it is born in relationship, inspired by inquiring into a future that is open to human influence, sustained by dialogue of ultimate concerns and generative of human affect and action. (1997, p. 1047)

OH can develop through presence of an important other or by communicating positive expectations and demonstrating trust in the individual's ability to overcome difficulties. Leaders and leadership play a key role in developing and establishing hope in the organisation. In recent leadership theory, Wallis et al. (2009) focus on hope and name two major role aspects of leaders important for hope: judgement making and social influence. Judgement making includes thinking into the future as well as perceiving self and other in the context of the organisation. And social influence is clearly what leaders mainly do on many different levels. From a psychodynamic perspective, a leader needs to create (opportunities for) containment, mutual trust, appreciation, and respect—this is the basis for hope. Aligned goals are as necessary as values and integrity, which also support the development of identity. A practical roadmap for leaders, developed by Nagel (2020), can be linked with the relatively new theory of “authentic leadership” which is connected to POB/POS. Authentic leadership is not a particular leadership style, but a “root construct”. It:

fosters high levels of trust which in turn encourage people to be more positive, to build on their strength, to expand their horizons of thinking, to act ethically and morally and to be committed to continuous improvement in organisation performance (Helland & Winston, 2005, p. 49)

and therefore allows for effective leadership. One of the keys to effective and authentic leadership is hope as an overall common process. The aim of effective leadership is to attain shared organisational goals beneficial for all stakeholders (Helland & Winston, 2005).

Identity

Identity development

Identity is the sense of self, of knowing “Who am I?”. Identity formation lies at the core of human development (as does hope)—from early childhood to old age. No human being can exist without a feeling of sense of self. Identity is

not something which is fixed and stable over a lifetime, it develops relative to the experiences and the encounters of the individual, and in different contexts, different aspects of identity become alive.

Despite the many theories around identity formation (e.g. Erikson, Kohut, Bowlby, Freud, Jung), some basic aspects seem to be consistent throughout. Identity develops from the beginning of life—when the caregiver mirrors the infant and shows signs of care, love, warmth, and appreciation—in other words, when the caregiver provides emotional containment, and holding, and meets the child with a gleam in their eye (Kohut). The encounter with the important “other” is needed to experience the self, without an “other” this is impossible (Mead, 1934). Only with an “other” can the feeling of belonging develop. Over time the feeling of identity evolves when linking and comparing the inner (consisting of objects, phantasies, feelings, experiences) with the outer world in striving for coherence, integrity, and continuity. The inner coherence, continuity, and experience can (basically) only be maintained when they are perceived by the other(s). The perception of the self, the sense of self, uniqueness, and self-esteem develop through relations with other(s), and how they behave towards us. The mechanisms at work here are introjection, (projective) identification, differentiation, and integration. Thus, identity always represents a dual relation—with the own self as well as with others—and is a construct containing the intrapsychic as well as the inter-subjective (Figure 1).¹

At the core of identity development are emotions and emotionality—whether we follow Freud’s ideas of primary and secondary narcissism or a post-Freudian, object relational, Jungian, or any other psychoanalytic perspective. The quality of emotions and of the emotional ties with others shape identity by identifying with or rejecting certain aspects, attributes, and properties of these others. The possibility for and the quality of relating

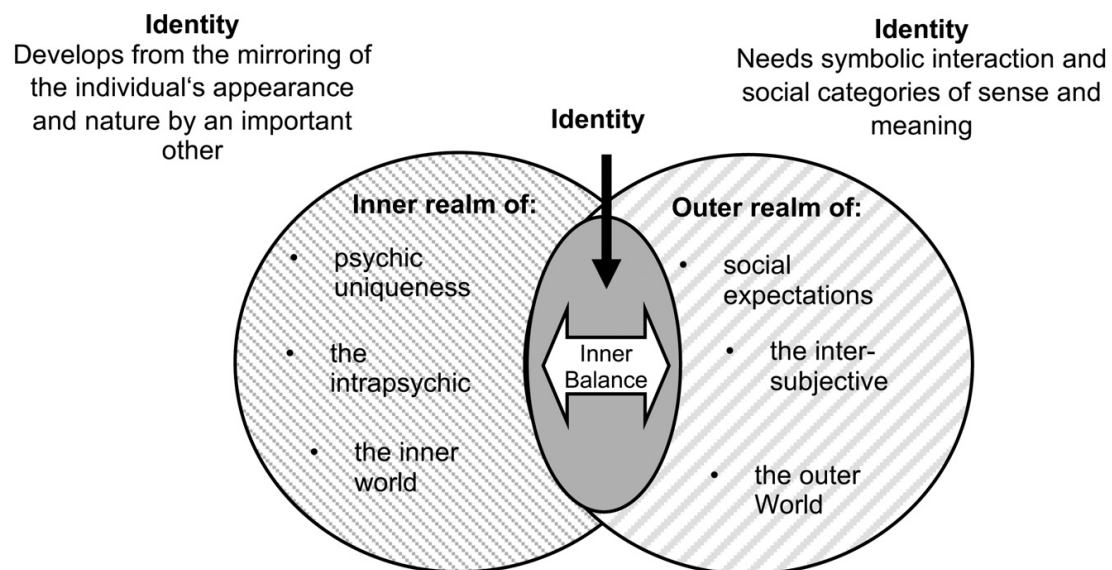


Figure 1. *The dual relation of identity.*

with the “other” depends mainly on the perceived containment, holding, and attachment, and the resulting basic trust.

When relating with the other, identity is always threatened through “being different from the other”, the conflict between the sense of own self, and the perceived self of the other. As social beings we always compare ourselves, our capacities, capabilities, traits, behaviours etc., resulting in a fear of rejection which can amount to a fear of annihilation and death. This fear has to be overcome and lies at the heart of all social processes.

Organisational identity

Every organisation seeks to maintain a sense of self, an identity which the members create and share and which the members believe to be its specific character. The organisational identity (OI) answers the question of “who are we?”. This implicitly clarifies who is allowed to belong to this special collective and also who is not. The answer to the question of “who are we?” allows the organisation to think about “who and how is the other and how are we different?”. It helps to differentiate itself from other organisations, it helps to classify and to categorise, and situates the organisation in a larger context. It simultaneously conveys distinctiveness and oneness (Albert et al., 2000). Drori et al (2013) “define an organization’s identity as members’ understanding of the shared values and norms that are central and distinctive to the organization” (p. 1719). Values, in this context, refer to the beliefs of members about what is important to the organisation (Schein, 1985), constituting an internal guide for behaviour, and a set of prescriptions for the organisation. Closely linked to and intertwined with organisational identity is organisational culture, which describes the “how we do things here”, and refers to three levels (Schein): the visible artefacts, the less conscious values, norms, and, on an often unconscious level, assumptions referring to purpose, relationships, communication, time, and space.

For the individual, the OI becomes part of their own identity and thus he or she gains a sense of meaningfulness, being connected and belonging. In belonging to this group and not to that group, the world becomes more manageable for the individual, who then knows that by fulfilling these specific social expectations organisational membership is achieved. This becoming part of the group comes with the price of a certain depersonalisation of the self, a self-stereotyping, redefining the self as “we”, rather than “I” (Haslam et al., 2003, p. 85).

Nothing is more difficult for individuals than to be rejected, outcasted, or scapegoated by a group. For human beings, as deeply social animals, the fear of not belonging equals the fear of annihilation, extinction, and thus survival—the worst of all fears. This is certainly the reason why belonging to groups and organisations is so important to individual beings.

Some aspects of identity, that is, membership of natural collectives (e.g. root family), cannot be chosen, whereas many other memberships (organisation, religion, profession, political party) are to be chosen and thus influence the individual identity, or better, the different individual identities.

The linking pin between hope and identity—“Geborgenheit” through containment and holding

Understanding the development of hope and identity, we must come to the conclusion that containment (Bion, 1970) links both, it lies at the heart of hope as well as identity. The opposing forces of containment, thus also linking hope and identity, are fear and anxiety, these are the basic negative emotions to be contained.

A container (Bion) provides a safe space for transforming these negative emotions. In early human development the caregiver functions as the container (Bion), and in a mode of reverie (an idea, first developed by Winnicott, than later taken over by Bion) helps the infant to digest and transform unbearable anxieties by taking them in and later reintrojecting them into the child in a digested form so that the child can integrate and continue to live with them. This process of projection/projective identification and reintrojection and integration is part of developing an identity and a sense of self which strives for coherence, continuity, and integrity.

Containment and being held are often used interchangeably (e.g. Hopper, 2001). Holding (Winnicott) alludes to the physical holding in the arms of the mother/caregiver. This holding is a first physical and emotional embrace which provides safety, care, protection, and is complemented by mirroring (Kohut). Feeling safe enables the developmental processes of the infant by making the child feel valued and secured (Winnicott, 1960). The idea of the good enough mother creating a holding environment exposes the child over the course of the development partially to negative stimuli as “the difficulties of life” and fosters thus further development of the self. The concept of holding can also be enlarged to later life and other people as well as to organisational holding environments (Kahn, 2001). From my understanding, containment is used more often in the context of managing anxiety, whereas holding is used more often in terms of creating a safe space for expressing negative emotions. Despite the different perceptions of containment and holding in early childhood development (e.g. Aguayo, 2018), they share at their core supporting the infant (and later the adult) in dealing with difficult emotions, developing a sense of self and identity, as well as the capacity to relate with others—for this article I will thus use them interchangeably.

In later life, containment and holding can be provided by other people (not only the significant other) or by one self. The capacity for self-containing is the result of good initial containment and identity development. The latter is closely linked to negative capability—the capacity to bear ambiguities and ambivalences and the accompanying emotions of stress and anxiety of the unknown, saving us from falling apart or rushing into a (split) decision. Lack of containment and holding results in an individual’s identity being fragmented, incoherent, and discontinuous. This has the detrimental effect of letting psychic and social defences take over and thus reduce the capacity for thinking and relating empathically. This also means that (basic) hope, as it is inter-relational and applies thinking for future orientation, cannot be developed.

On the organisational level, containment can be provided by other members of the organisation as well as groups or larger entities, “the capacity to think, on the part of individuals or groups, is related to the capacity for containment of anxiety” (Lawlor, 2009, p. 525). Menzies Lyth discovered that non-human aspects of organisations, such as structures, technologies, policies, and work methods can also function as a container (Lees et al., 2013; Menzies Lyth, 1988).

Hope is fragile and identity can become disturbed in times of crisis. The effects of crisis on hope and identity depend mainly on the quality of containment—may it happen on an individual or organisational level.

When, in times of crisis, if the level of fear is not too high it can be managed cognitively and emotionally. When it is too great—too strong, too long, too high a dose—often further feelings of impotence, helplessness, powerlessness may arise.

The next psychological step depends on containment—when the person can find containment in itself or with other people, hope can develop, and reflection as well as action to move beyond the crisis (Figure 2).

When there is no or not enough containment, basic biological reactions such as freeze/fight/flight reactions are possible—on a physical as well as psychic level. No action, manic overreaction/panic or psychosocial defensive reactions may kick in.

When the crisis is ongoing and leads to needs being unmet for an extended period, and the pain of fear and other as unpleasant discomforting feelings (pain of loss, helplessness, impotence) continue, they will be warded off by psychic and social defence mechanisms. A problematic and dangerous vicious circle then starts—when fear is not acknowledged and worked with, it will continue to create more uncertainty, more helplessness, more unmet needs, more defences, etc. (Figure 3).

The basic mechanisms of these defences are projection (externalisation), splitting (including denial and suppression), and introjection (including internalisation, identification, and incorporation) (Nagel, 2020). These mechanisms protect against inner and outer threats or conflicts—the pain of the conflict

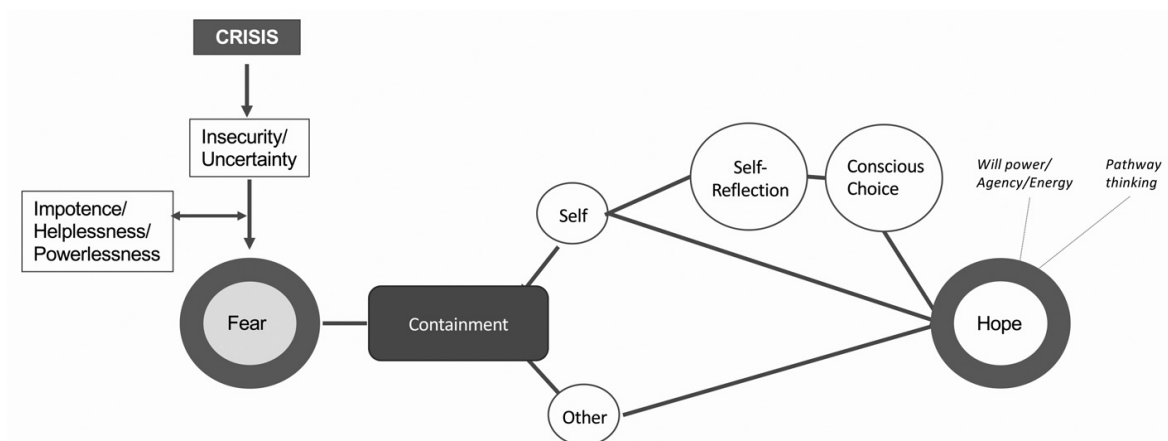


Figure 2. Containment is important for hope.

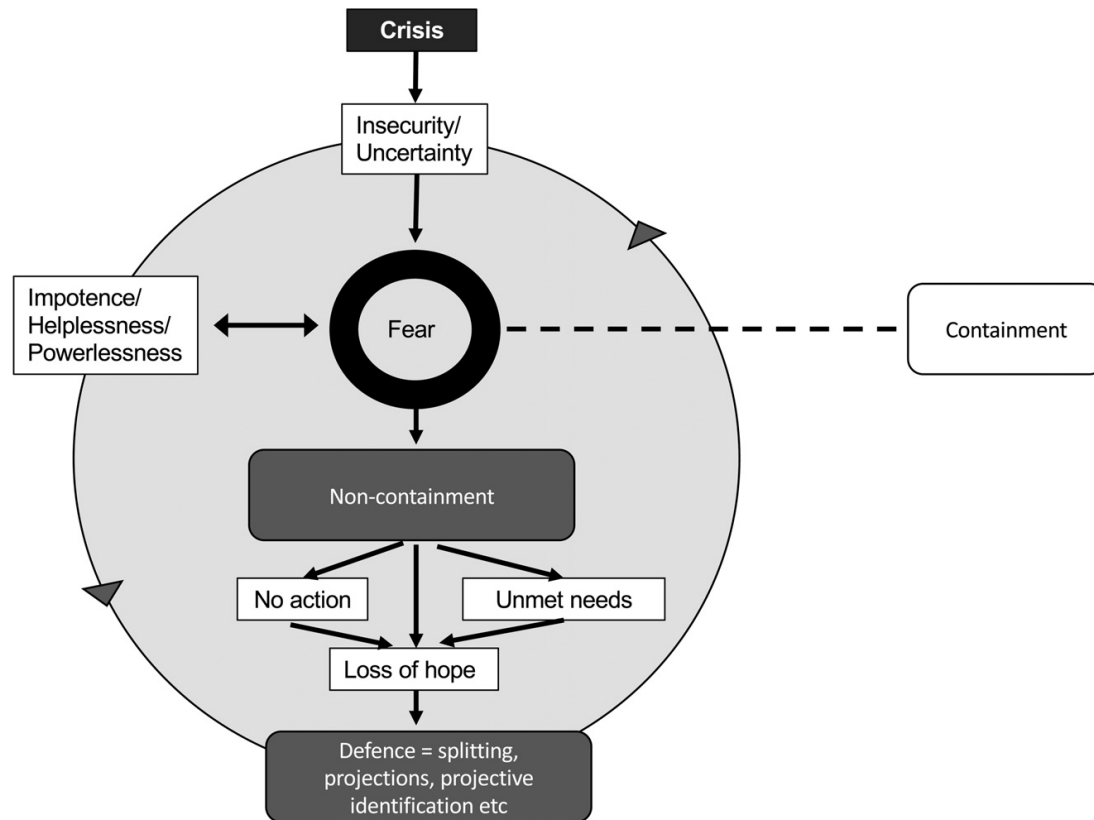


Figure 3. The impact of non-containment in times of crisis.

and the threat are no longer experienced because an important aspect is either projected out, split off, or introjected and turned against the self. These mechanisms can work on an individual as well as a group level, all of them link into a lack of coherence and identity, also on an individual as well as group level. Most of present political and social developments in the world, such as populism, can be traced back to the effects of these defence mechanisms. We will look at these developments in part two.

PART TWO

Leadership and psychosocial defences

Leaders play an important role in the creation of OI and OH, its preservation as well as its change. The trust they bring and develop, the projections they allow for through their specific way of being, and their way of communicating can bring a shift of identity that is necessary in times of crisis. However, as much as the individual tries to build up and maintain their self, it defends its characteristic way of being, its oneness and distinctiveness, and the respective boundaries. So, when identity is threatened, the social defence system starts working. The same happens on the group/organisational level (Brown & Starkey, 2000, p. 102).

When the leader and/or the structures, rules, and regulations do an inad-

equate job of containing underlying anxieties, social defences can set in. Their aim is to transform and neutralise strong tensions and affects so that the group remains (emotionally) unthreatened. The social defence system consists of different layers. On the visible level, organisational symbols can distort or conceal reality. They might restrict the capacity to perceive and process information. As symbols in this defensive sense, myths, uniforms, titles, and hierarchies may be recognised for their soothing and reassuring capacity (Brown & Starkey, 2000). Cultural and organisational complexes (Singer & Kimbles, 2004) might be a defence against a former trauma or discrimination anchored in the collective unconscious of a group. If stirred up, these past experiences can captivate the (group's) collective psyche, whereby the cultural unconscious captures perceptions, behavioural patterns and feelings that follow their own logic. Cognitive biases also form a specific set of defences protecting the individual as well as the group from unpleasant insights. Upholding existing belief structures as collective denial of a problem play an important role in groupthink (Janis, 1972). Regression, projective identification, phantasy, and idealisation are the common ground for Bion's basic assumptions (1961). When in this mode, group members will assume both what they should do—the primary task—and what they are implicitly expected to do—their phantasy (Ettin et al., 1997). Bion designated these observed collective patterns “cultures” or “mentalities” (French & Simpson, 2010). The group functions as a work group on a conscious and more rational plane, whereas on a less conscious and less rational plane, the members experience and enact the elements of the “basic assumption culture” or “mentality”. The work group mentality is concerned with completing the primary task, while at the same time consciously and effectively dealing with the emotions that arise within and from this process. The term basic assumption mentality indicates the unconscious identification with a phantasy, which is not reality but perceived as if it were reality. When a group shifts away from the primary task and the work group mentality shifts to a basic assumption mentality, group members may not realise this shift and even think that the work atmosphere has improved. If a group member detects a pattern and shares this insight with other group members, they will most likely be ignored or attacked, hence the basic assumption mentality will prevail (French & Simpson, 2010). Table 1 provides an overview of already discovered basic assumption mentalities.

Through regression to collective unconscious fantasies (first column), members create a “new” (unconscious) group identity and mentality (second column) from a combination of defence mechanisms (third column) to deal with a specific set of emotions (fourth column) which can support or hinder achievement of the primary goal. This arising basic assumption mentality may be either short-lived, oscillate, or persist as the dominant mode (Bion, 1961). Although originally intended to mitigate emotional threats, basic assumptions can over time become dysfunctional and bureaucratic, since they not only reduce anxiety, but also replace compassion, empathy, awareness, and meaning with control and impersonality as Kets de Vries (2004) describes.

Table 1. Overview of basic assumption mentalities (Nagel, 2014), adapted from Kinzel (2002).

| <i>Collective phantasy</i> | <i>Basic assumption mentality</i> | <i>Dominant defence mechanism</i> | <i>Dominant affect</i> |
|----------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Dependency (Bion) | The leader should feed and protect | Idealisation of the leader or his/her “word” | Depression, jealousy, guilt, worship |
| Pairing (Bion) | Resulting from the pairing of two group members, something new, a new idea/person will rid the group of destruction, hate, and hopelessness | Phantasies via an utopian ideal, denial of the fight with one of the partners, identification with the pair | Hope, trust, enthusiasm, despair, disillusion |
| Fight–flight (Bion) | The existence of an external enemy, who necessitates fight, defence, or flight | Projection and splitting | Anger, hate, fear, moments of suspicion |
| One-ness (Turquet) | Powerful connection with an almighty power, an oceanic feeling of unity | Denial of individual differences | Identity fears and conflicts, fragmentation, animosity |
| Me-ness (Lawrence, Bain & Gould) | The individual’s inner-world becomes a place of comfort. The group does not exist | Splitting and projection in society | Fear of destruction and loss of self, sadism, passive aggression |
| Group-formation (Hatcher Cano) | The group oscillates between one-ness and me-ness | Attacks on alliances and integrative attempts | Threat to the group identity and individual identity |

As a consequence, the perception of reality becomes distorted and decision-making is impaired.

In times of crisis and/or diluted organisational boundaries, people also feel more fearful within organisations. When due to the crisis the existing organisation cannot provide the usual containment and people are touched so deeply that they cannot function anymore, the need for a different and maybe new way of holding is needed. People then require more support at work, although they are also less likely to give or even receive support (Kahn, 2001). Containing, holding environments function as “temporary shelters to which people, caught in storms, find their way” (Kahn, 2001, p. 268). Containment and holding need people actively doing so, however it can fail for a wide number of reasons and is impossible when groups have erected social defences (Kahn, 2001). Yet, leaders are crucial in creating organisational holding and containment. I will demonstrate which role hope and identity play in this.

Observations from today’s crisis—when containment fails—victimism/supremacism as a new basic assumption mentality

When things are going well (individual and organisational) identity is developed, preserved, as well as adapted, people feel safe, secure, and connected, anxieties are contained, and hope and constructive action can flourish.

In times of crisis, fear and anxiety go up, depending on degree and cause, feelings of helplessness and powerlessness develop, uncertainty and also insecurity grow. When these negative emotions can be contained—by oneself, by an authentic leader, by friends and family, by membership in a containing group, by self-containment of the group, people can function and assume the primary task.

But when containment fails, a downward spiral begins on several organisational levels. In times of crisis, under the effect of fear and anxiety due to loss and uncertainty, psychosocial defences such as basic assumption mentalities flourish. As we are in the middle of the corona crisis, climate crisis, digitisation crisis, political crisis, democracy crisis, race crisis, gender crisis, we can expect to see dysfunctional defences on different levels of group, organisational, and societal life (Figure 4).

In the following I would like to share my observations on the Covid-19 crisis and preceding crises on an organisational and societal level. I will use the terms *individual* and *organisation* to address the basic processes and the latter independent from happening on group, organisational, or societal level. The described mechanism can happen on all three levels.

In a crisis we can always observe “losers” and “winners”. Under normal circumstances people can cope with their respective role. They fence off and do not want to deal emotionally with the other group, either by avoiding being “infected” by losing (“winners”) or emotional suffering (“losers”). Most “losers”

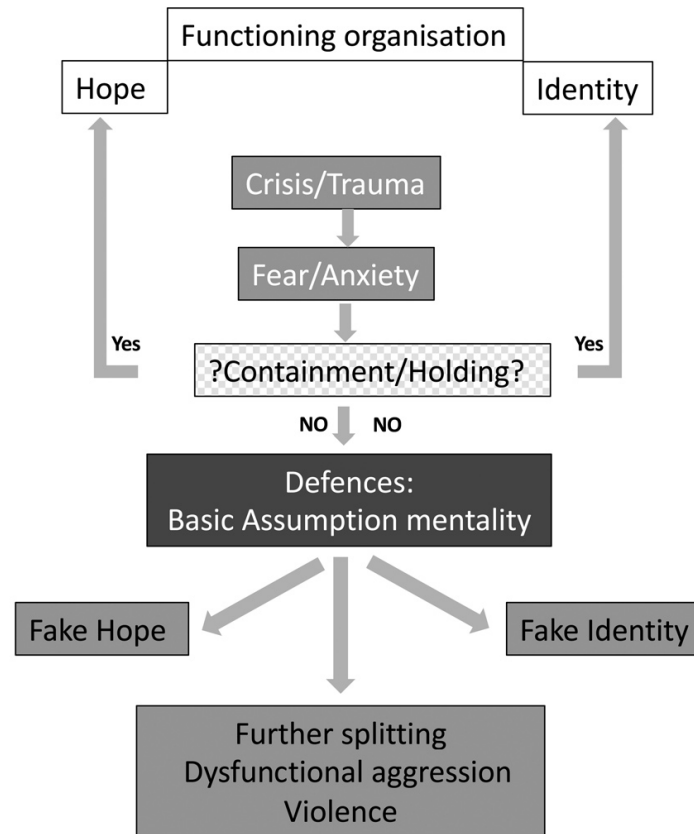


Figure 4. The key role of containment.

can accept their fate and deal with this, however, we can observe these days, that others develop a victim mentality or “victim-ism”. This “victimism” can be understood as part of a new basic assumption mode. The word ends purposefully on -ism to allude to the ideological and political character of this movement, such as in socialism, capitalism, communism, ending on -hood would be too neutral and not convey this inherent characteristic.

By victimism I want to refer to this new development which can be observed on many different organisational and societal levels across different countries. In this mode, people claim to be a “victim”, and together with other “victims” of the seemingly same class of subdued people, they create a new group and membership. However, this membership is built on an illusion of belonging and identity and presents us with a new psychosocial defence mechanism (Nagel, 2020, 2021). In identifying as a victim, people give away agency, autonomy, and responsibility, and project the fear of a lack of potency to a phantasmised omnipotent leader whom they give full authority to decide on their behalf. When the victim is united with other victims, an authoritative or authoritarian leader is born. The leader promises to take the victim out of victimhood into the “land of milk and honey” in which they will not only no longer be oppressed but also be happy and free of sorrow. This land of milk and honey functions as a container, though it is a “fake container”, since the leader will not digest and transform their anxieties but enforce the

splitting and transform the anxiety into hate and aggression. Instead of differentiation and integration, differences will be emphasised—a false or fake identity building on distorted differences is the outcome. The victims are united in their victim mentality with mutual, shared understanding. This is part of the “fake holding” the leader creates in this victimism environment so that the victims no longer have a need for the outside other for them to feel accepted and loved. The victims form a union which as a further defence strives to reject and being rejected by either the establishment, the winners, or newcomers such as, for example, migrants. This false/fake identity serves as a survival mode against the feeling of being left out, annihilated, vanishing, and against a sense of worthlessness and uselessness. It also provides energy through aggression against otherness and the other. It is reminiscent of the Kohutian idea of the false self which from the perspective of self-psychology protects the vulnerable, hurt, and traumatised real self. Real victims, such as, for example, migrants or (former) slaves, endanger this victim mentality/victimism and are thus strongly dismissed (Nagel, 2020, 2021).

The false victims start to feel supreme and powerful by projecting their narcissistic wishes for grandiosity on the authoritarian leader who identifies with these projections, whilst at the same time the fake victims identify with him or her and his or her projected grandiosity/supremacy. This is one aspect of supremacism.

However, this supremacism can also develop out of real victimhood. Real victims try to work hard to escape their real victim role. But the harder they work to get out of their role, the stronger their connection to the oppressor (a similar phenomenon can be observed in relationships—hate or fear can attach a person as much as love and care can). Real victimhood may evoke and create supremacism on the side of the oppressors—because of their denied and warded-off feelings of shame and guilt. The supremacism applies to social phenomenon such as racism, colonialism, as well as identitarianism—the really oppressed, abused, or forgotten groups have an unwanted and unconscious effect on the oppressor. Because the victim consciously wants to leave the position of being a victim and would often like to become powerful like the oppressor and develop into a position of their strength, they project this hope onto the oppressor. The projection of power enters the perceived oppressor, who may not want to actively oppress, or may even perceive themselves in a position of carrying out injustice. The perceived oppressors then unconsciously introject or identify with this projection, whilst the victim identifies continuously with the victim role. This identification of the perceived oppressor may lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and disgust which are then again warded off—the result can be a supremacist mentality.²

I propose to call this basic assumption mentality BA V/S. At the core lies an overidentification with the role of the victim (Figure 5).

This may happen to real victims as well as to self-perceived victims. When one overidentifies with only one aspect—being a victim—of the many possible aspects of identity, victimism develops. Supremacism is the result of the wish for power and success and is either projected onto the leader of the

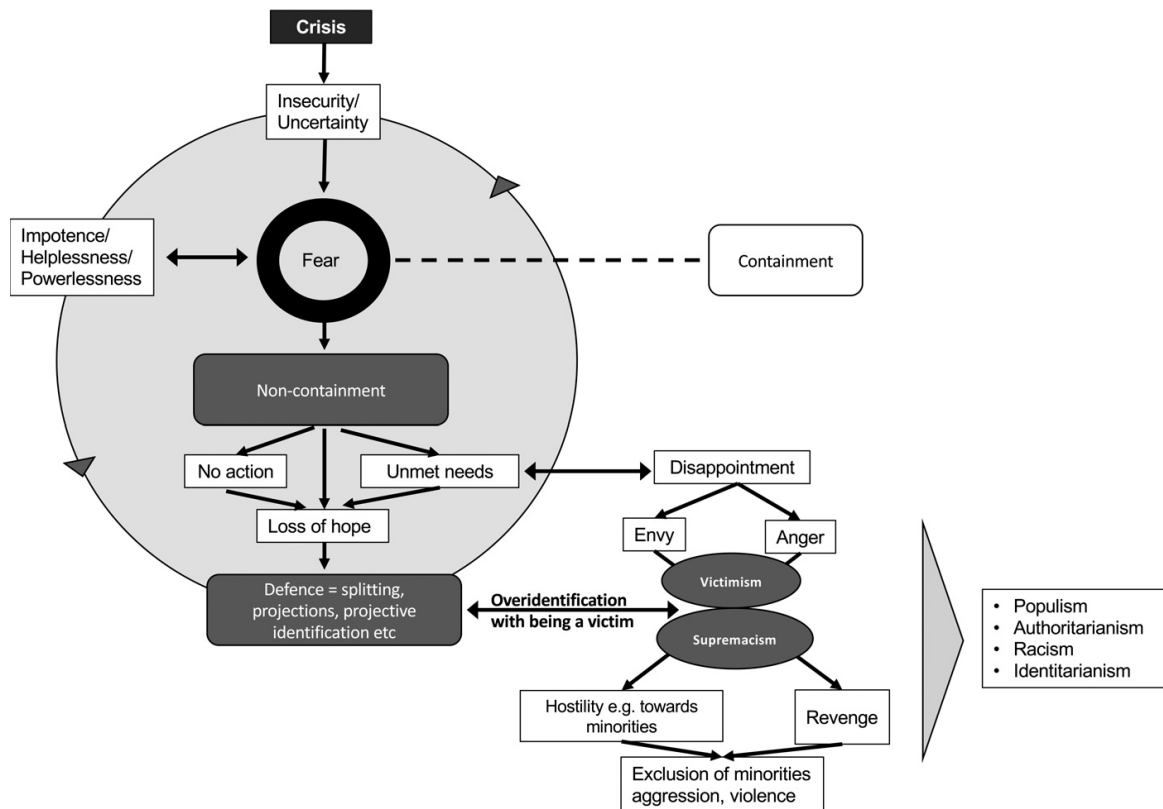


Figure 5. The core-concept of BA victimism/supremacism.

group or onto the other group. In the first case, the victim identifies with the perceived supreme leader; in the second case, the other group identifies with this projection.

This mentality can be well observed in populism in general, in racism as well as in colonialism, also in identitarianism, genderism etc.—all being ideologically founded by a perception of inferiority, (self- and other-) devaluation, and elevation. It would read the following as an additional line in the above-mentioned table of already detected basic assumption mentalities (Table 2).

Creating hope and identity to overcome the BA V/S—the role of leadership

The creation of real hope and identity on individual as well as on group, organisational, or societal levels is the key ingredient to overcoming the BA V/S caused by the fear of annihilation. It depends on the effectivity of containment and thus on managing this basal fear.

The psychodynamic literature on the formation of OH and OI attributes the capacity for creating containment to the leader. However, the literature tends to focus more on anti-task phenomenon of leaders and followers (see e.g. Obholzer, 1994, p. 45), talking about dysfunctions of teams, groups, leaders etc., about pathologies (e.g. Bion, Kets de Vries etc.), the projective surface the leader offers for their idealisation and thus for regressive behaviours (e.g. Long, 2003). It deals with authority, power, and boundaries, as well as the

Table 2. The basic assumption mentality victimism/supremacism (BA V/S).

| <i>Collective phantasy</i> | <i>Basic assumption mentality</i> | <i>Dominant defence mechanism</i> | <i>Dominant affect</i> |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|
| Victimism/supremacism | A group unites out of a feeling of inferiority/ being “a victim only”, and by that authorises a leader on their behalf or the other group with their hope for supremacy. Alternatively: the overidentification of real victims and the projection of supremacy on the perceived oppressor acting it out | Splitting and projective identification | Fear of annihilation and powerlessness, anger, envy, need for revenge |

impact of emotions on organisational relations and life. These perspectives are helpful to the development of critical thinking and (self-) consciousness to avoid destructive leadership situations and to enlarge autonomy and responsibility, yet the constructive aspect seems to be missing.

Some positive voices can be found: Kets de Vries (2004) understands organisations as often being dysfunctional and neurotic (dramatic/cyclothymic, depressive, detached, suspicious, and compulsive, all closely connected to individual neurotic types) and sees a goal in developing authentizotic organisations which are based on three meta values: feeling of community, sense of enjoyment, and a sense of meaning (Kets de Vries, 2004). Schein (2013) proposes even organisational therapy to develop more healthy and humane organisations.

More such actively supportive aspects of leadership can be found in the positive psychology realm based on Seligman’s work (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology is gaining more attention, probably because it focuses more on people’s strengths than pathological symptoms, and thus is more acceptable and understandable for the lay psychologist.

In this field of positive psychology, hope and hopeful thinking are essential for effective leadership, since hope “can be described as a positive motivational state that contributes to leaders and followers expending the requisite energy necessary to pursue and attain organisational goals” (Helland & Winston, 2005, p. 42), shared and beneficial for all stakeholders including the community in which the organisation resides (Helland & Winston, 2005), that is, working on the actual and the future primary task.

From a psychodynamic perspective, OH can be developed via self-reflection and self-containment of leaders and members to create a safe

space and containment for the people in the organisation. The leader in particular needs to develop an understanding of the (natural human) splitting tendencies in times of crisis and turmoil and find a way to integrate and heal the split instead of exacerbating it. He or she has to resist supremacy projections in the mentality of BA V/S. Hope has a contagious effect on employees and the organisation, as demonstrated by Norman et al. (2005), as well do defences via regression.

Authentic leadership might be one helpful approach to understanding what leaders have to do or to be or how they must behave. It is rooted in the work of Bass (1990) and Bass and Steidlmeier (1999), further developed by, for example, Avolio et al. (2004a) and is very close to, or almost the same as, transformational leadership which has been researched for forty years. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) defined the four components of authentic (transformational) leadership as: “idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration” (p. 181). Authentic leaders are:

deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and other’s values/moral perspectives, knowledge and strength; aware of the context in which they operate, and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient and of high moral character. (Avolio et al., 2004b, p. 4, cited in Avolio et al., 2004a, p. 803)

in short, (self-)conscious leaders with moral character and the capability to transfer insight into behaviour and action.

Leaders can construct OI in times of crisis or external changes in looking at it from a process-oriented perspective, focusing on the future and the “how we are becoming an organisation” instead of “who we are”. If that is supported by long-term examinations of the past, then bolder claims for the future seem to be likely (Schultz & Hernes, 2013).

When understanding OI from a psychodynamic perspective, purely as a system of defences, the conclusion can be made that OI can be treated and cured (e.g. Kets de Vries, 2004; Schein, 2013). From a theoretical standpoint it seems to be easier to treat the leader, and via the leader this might affect the organisation. Whether the organisation as a system is treatable seems to be questionable, as it can only be influenced via individuals and changing context.

Based on what has been said on hope, identity, and their connection via containment and holding, I would like to propose a set of activities and contributions which will support the development of containment and holding, and via that hope and identity enable a functional, performing organisation.

Most important are the leader’s personal contribution (self-reflection), attitude (wanting to heal splits), and leadership (developing goals and using authentic leadership as vision). They are followed by the way the leader works with the organisation in developing future scenarios and integrating all stakeholders. The members of the organisation can best contribute by giving open and honest feedback and being open to giving and receiving support (Figure 6).

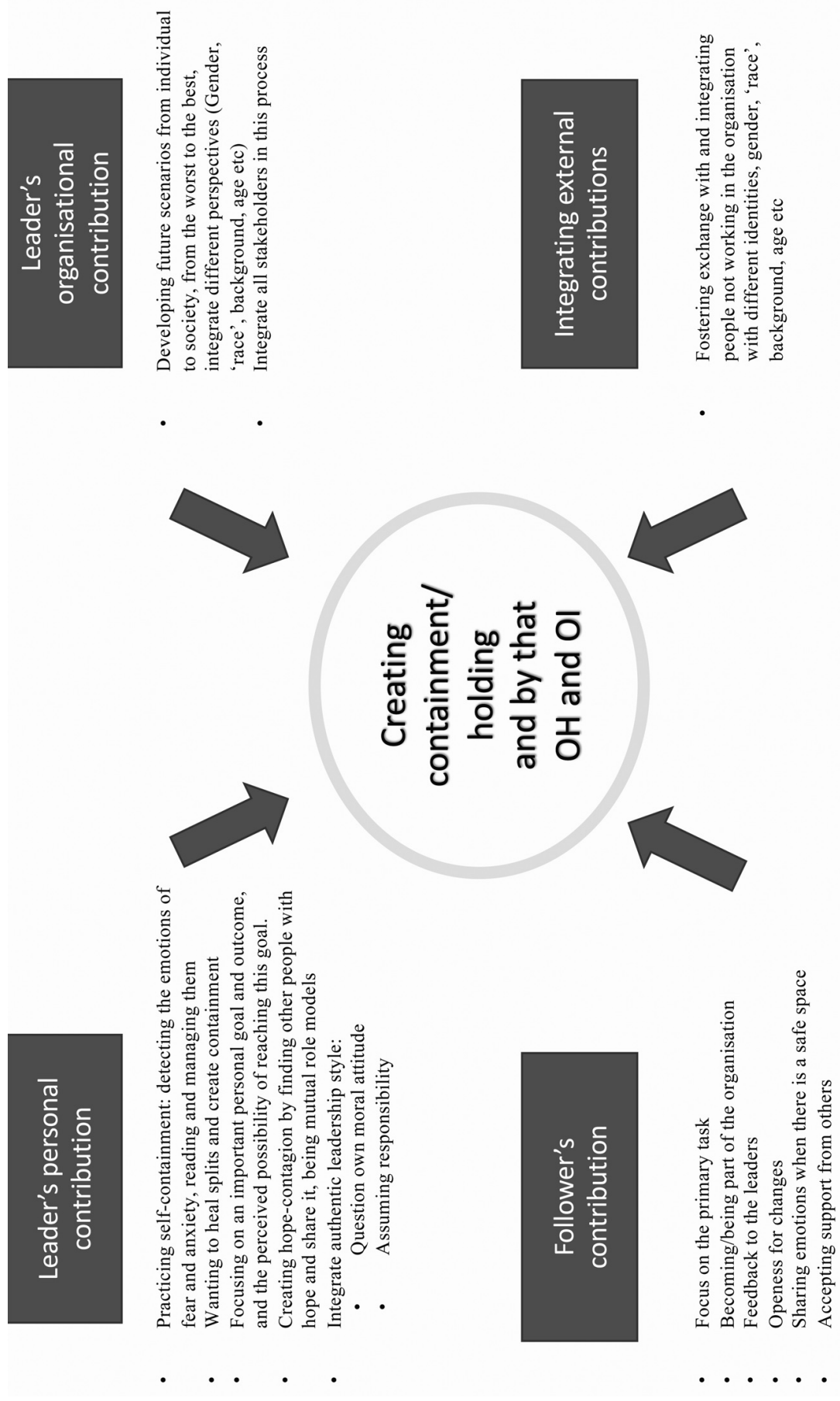


Figure 6. Internal and external contributions to create OH and OI.

Authentic leadership

Authentic leadership is a second-order construct formed by perceptions of four first-order dimensions: transparency, moral/ethical, balanced processing, and self-awareness (Avolio et al., 2004a). Green (2014) deemed transparency as forthrightness in action and deed and morals/ethics as a product of trustworthiness, integrity, and rectitude. Green believes balanced processing to be deliberation in decision-making and self-awareness to be a deep understanding of self and how one interacts within a given environment. Authentic leadership is a system of leader actions dominated by these four first-order factors to enhance the well-being of followers (Luthans et al., 2004).

Summary

Hope and identity are closely linked via fear and containment. If in times of crisis, characterised by heightened uncertainty and fear, containment is possible and real, either on the individual or on the organisational level, hope can be created and by that, identity will develop further and also the other way round. They mutually influence each other positively.

If fear cannot be contained and worked with, several psychosocial mechanisms are likely to appear. When the crisis leads to unmet needs, in addition to restricted thinking and feeling, it also leads to a downward spiral of negative emotions such as anger and envy. These can culminate in a victimism/supremacism BA mentality—based on splitting and scapegoating, revenge for unmet needs is acted out to the detriment of another group/organisation which is devalued, punished, and treated as an object. In our present situation we can observe the victim-ism mode on all levels, at the individual, group, political, even national.

What can we do? We need leaders with a healing and hope-building capacity. The human capacity for opening-up heart and mind to another human being is key, and if we lose this capacity, then dealing with, for example, corona crisis, climate change, or solving other large worldwide problems will be impossible.

Notes

1. All figures and tables in this article are the author's copyright and can only be reproduced when citing the article as source.
2. What I am trying to describe here is a delicate balancing act. I talk about supremacism mentality, I do not talk about supremacism as a basic attitude which has existed prior to the projections of victims in victimism mode and which has, in my eyes, no justification. However, it seems that all ideological attitudes have root in a defensive mechanism against a perceived anxiety of being extinguished by the other, which is then suppressed.

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