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The organization of Santa: fetishism, ambivalence and narcissism

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Abstract

Santa is an essential part of Christmas. He is not just a fantasy image or cultural product. Instead, psychological and sociological research shows that we relate to Santa as both real person and a fantasy entity. In particular, parents, who know that Santa is not real, have been found to believe in Santa as if he were real. They both provide their children with misinformation about Santa and condition them into acting out their belief that Santa is a real person. The article argues that parents' role in this organization of Santa can be understood through the psychoanalytic concepts of fetishism, ambivalence and narcissism. The article concludes that parents' misinform their children about Santa in order to meet their own narcissistic wishes. They organize a world based on an image they wish were true as if it were true.

Keywords

ambivalence, fetishism, Freud, narcissim, Santa, Santa Claus

If we want to understand the organization of Christmas, particularly within contemporary Western societies where it serves as a break from work and school, an orgy of consumption and a state of exception, full of hope and joy, we must surely take account of Santa Claus—'the magical figure, who bridges the sacred and the secular realms' (Truzzi, 1968: 242). 'Santa Claus', ethnographers Thompson and Hickey (1989: 371) confirm, is not only 'a vital player in the myths and rituals that surround the Christmas holiday' but without him it 'would not be Christmas'. As one of the 'most popular mythical figures' (Cyr, 2002: 1325), Santa surrounds us at Christmas time. He 'is a regular on television, and his picture appears in virtually every newspaper and magazine … He sits atop floats in holiday parades, and promotes a variety of products in supermarkets and department stores' (Thompson and Hickey, 1989: 371). Indeed, Santa can be used to promote almost any product without causing offence, as long as Christmas is not too far in the future, and can cross

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cultural and geographical boundaries with ease (Levi-Strauss, 1993). In cultural texts, he can play the role of a benevolent father figure, a leering thief or a homicidal robot and no one will bat an eyelash (Belk, 2001, Harker, 1980). He can also attract tourists to spend money—as demonstrated in the long-standing battle to become the official home of Santa. This battle began when the citizens of Bari, Italy had the bright idea to steal Santa's alleged remains from a nearby village and claim them as their own (Ovesen, 2001: 535). In more recent times, *Coca-Cola* has wrongly claimed that it originated the modern image of Santa (McKay, 2008) while Finland, Greenland and the North Pole have competed to be Santa's official home (Pretes, 1995).

But Santa is not only an essential component in the organization of modern Christmas because of his economic significance. As religious festivities have given way to commerce, Santa has replaced 'God as the figure to be worshipped at Christmas' (Boyer, 1995: 481). Yet the belief in Santa, like the belief in God, is full of ambiguities (Boerger et al., 2009). When we are children, Santa is very much a real part of our Christmases. Christmas is about what Santa, as a real if fantastic person, will bring us. Then, around the age of seven, a majority of us come to the conclusion that Santa is not real (Anderson and Prentice, 1994; Sharon and Woolley, 2004). At this point we begin to recognize 'inherent contradictions' in our image of Santa and we come to see him as a fantasy entity associated with a particular event like the Eater Bunny and the Tooth Fairy (Prentice et al., 1978; Woolley et al., 2004). He is someone we celebrate but know is not real. We see him all around us at Christmas but we know the truth: he is a fake. Nevertheless, even though we know Santa is not real, as adults we continue to interact with him as if he were real and we play along with cultural texts that present evidence of Santa as when the news reports in earnest 'that a sled had been sighted in the sky' on Christmas Eve (Nelms, 1996: 243). Parents, in particular, then, construct Santa for their children at the same time as they consume Santa themselves by acting out the idea that Santa is real (Woolley et al., 2004: 158). On this point Pretes (1995: 14) tells us that Santa Claus is the epitome of 'a western cultural product: a simulacrum, a copied image for which no original exists'.

In this article I ask why we establish Santa's credentials as a real figure before revealing him as a fantasy entity only to reinstate the idea that Santa is real. Why, in other words, does Santa oscillate between a real figure, a living myth and a fallen idol? To put this in the terms of an organizational analysis, accepting that these ideas about Santa do not just emerge but are organized through specific cultural sources including the activities of parents, I want to ask what are the goals of the organization of Santa? Boerger et al. (2009: 953) tell us that 'parental misinformation' may be motivated be a variety of reasons such as ensuring compliance with social rules and enhancing 'the wonder of childhood'. Hagstrom (1968), too, considers the various social functions that Santa fulfils. He (1968: 244) tells us that 'the persistence' of our belief in Santa despite the overwhelming evidence against his existence 'implies a social meaning and a social function'. Influenced by this work but departing from it I will argue that the organization of Santa on the part of parents reflects the wider issue of belief within capitalist societies—an issue I will frame through the idea of fetishism (Marx, 1976; Pels et al., 2002; Pietz, 1985; Žižek, 2009). This concept has been interpreted through a psychoanalytic lens within organization studies as a way of explaining how our beliefs about the world can be influenced by our wishes such that we organize the world in accordance with what we wish was true *as if* it were true (Böhm and Batta, 2010). Developing this perspective I offer two psychoanalytic explanations for why parents might want to convince their children that Santa is real by turning to one of the most infamous psychoanalytic theorists of fetishism: Sigmund Freud (Phillips, 1993). First, I draw on Freud's concept of ambivalence to explain the vicissitudes of belief in Santa before turning to the narcissistic motivations that, for Freud, lie behind fetishism. I conclude that parents' role in the organization of Santa allows them to fulfil a range of narcissistic

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desires through their children and through Santa. Through this analysis I add to the growing organizational literature that uses psychoanalytic theory, in particular research concerning narcissism (Duchon and Drake, 2009; Stein, 2003), and augment Böhm and Batta's (2010) work into fetishism and organization.

Psychologies and sociologies of Santa

Hagstrom (1968), Nelms (1996) and Ovesen (2001) point out there is a lack of interest in Santa across many academic disciplines. Historians have written about the roots of our modern image of Santa in various folk traditions (Sereno, 1951) and consumer researchers have shown us how these images of Santa are consumed (Belk, 2001; Downs, 1983; Pretes, 1995). But most of the research concerning Santa comes from psychologists and sociologists. From these literatures we inherent two distinct features of the organization of Santa. First, there is not a linear process of unveiling a lie but rather a movement into holding two views of Santa, one that allows us to enjoy him as if he were real and another that acknowledges he is not. It is, in other words, an ambivalent truth. On this point psychologists have investigated the effects of ambivalence on our mental health while sociologists focus on the ways these two ideas about Santa are enacted as social roles. Second, both bodies of literature emphasize that parents' and children's wishes play important roles in supporting the idea that Santa is real as well as the idea that he is not real. In this regard, psychologists have found that parents condition their children to act out a belief in Santa by offering them rewards when they demonstrate their belief while sociologists show us that parents act out this belief themselves in the presence of their children. When they are alone adults often ignore Santa or are even openly hostile to him but around children they enthusiastically play along with Santa as if he were real.

Psychology and Santa: is Santa good or bad?

Exploring how the belief in Santa develops, Boerger et al. (2009), Sharon and Woolley (2004), Tullos and Woolley (2009) and Woolley et al. (2004) offer a range of studies investigating the development of children's ability to attribute reality status. Throughout they use Santa as an 'event-related fantasy entity' which, while possessing the characteristics of a fantasy being, is invariably characterized as being real by the children they study (Woolley et al., 2004: 457). In Sharon and Woolley's work (2004), for instance, roughly the same number of five-year olds agreed that Santa was real as agreed that Michael Jordan, the basketball player, was. This leads these researchers to conclude that it is not simply the case that as children grow older and develop their 'causal reasoning' skills that they come to see that Santa is a fantasy (Cyr, 2002: 1325). Rather this capacity has been shown to develop while the belief in Santa remains constant or, on occasion, deepens (Sharon and Woolley, 2004: 300). For this reason, Cyr (2002: 1327) argues that as children develop they 'are able to think about Santa Claus simultaneously in two different ways: as a pleasing idea that helps them enjoy Christmas and as someone who is not real'. Sharon and Woolley (2004) offer empirical support for this claim while Woolley et al. (2004) conclude that apart from their causal reasoning skills it is children's emotions and wider cultural sources that influence whether they think Santa is real.

These cultural sources include both the cultural texts discussed above and also children's peers and parents. These are, typically, the 'sources' of information upon which children make judgements about the world (Woolley et al. 2004: 456). However, with regards to fantasy beings such as Santa, the authority and validity of these sources inverts. Parents and other authority figures are often

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more trusted and knowledgeable than peers yet it is them who provide the erroneous information about Santa. 'Parents', Woolley et al. (2004: 458) tell us, 'often go out of their way to produce indirect "evidence" of the existence' of Santa. They 'frequently encourage behaviours (e.g. writing letters to Santa Claus) that give children a sense of having interacted with real entities' (Boerger et al., 2009: 955). Likewise, Anderson and Prentice (1994) tell us that parents play a key role in both creating and supporting children's ideas about Santa. They find that 94% of parents tell their children that Santa brings them toys at Christmas. Anderson and Prentice's study also shows us that parents draw on cultural texts for support, with 98% reading books about Santa to their children and 96% watching television shows or films about Santa with their children. In this regards, Cyr (2002: 1326) rhetorically asks whether the belief in Santa is 'forced' on children by their parents.

Counter to this suggestion, Boerger et al. (2009: 954) point out that children do not always believe everything their parents tell them. In particular, children have been found to be sceptical about Santa. They recognize fantasy attributes in Santa even if they characterize Santa as a real figure (Boerger et al., 2009). As we will see below, some children seem 'obliged to test Santa's authenticity' (Thompson and Hickey, 1989: 379) while many others only ever pretend to believe in Santa (Hagstrom, 1968).

But if children are never truly convinced by the stories they are told about Santa, in what sense do children learn something new when they conclude that he is not real? Moreover, if both adults and children only pretend that they believe in Santa for the benefit of others, surely we must wonder who really believes in Santa at all. One argument that has been put forward is that children are conditioned to act out a belief in Santa rather than actually believe in him. Parents reward demonstrations of belief in Santa with 'positive outcomes, such a receiving presents' (Woolley et al., 2004: 458). It is here that children's emotions and desires influence them into acting *as if* they believed in Santa even though that belief is rarely complete (Sharon and Woolley, 2004: 294). Here, Anderson and Prentice (1994) demonstrate that around the age of seven children stop believing in Santa but continue to act *as if* they do because they continue to receive rewards as long as they demonstrate that they think Santa is real.

So while parents play a role in instilling the idea that Santa is real through operant conditioning, they have been shown to be less effective when their children realize that they can still get presents even if they do not believe in Santa. In this regard, Anderson and Prentice (1994), Boerger et al. (2009) and Cyr (2002) and tell us that while parents play a key role in creating and maintaining the idea that Santa is real, they play a less active role in undermining this idea, with around 54% of children finding out the truth about Santa without any parental influence. Perhaps it is for this reason that adults and children report very different emotions when a child learns that Santa does not exist. Many parents report that they reacted to their child's discovery with a feeling of sadness while children report feelings of pleasure at their discovery (Ovesen, 2001). On this point Cyr (2002: 1327) tells us that children demonstrate 'predominately positive reactions on learning the truth: two of three said that they felt a sense of pride in figuring out the truth about Santa … Parents, however, described themselves as predominately sad in reaction to their child's discovery'. Cyr (2002) and Ovesen (2001) suggest that both the children's positive reactions and the parents' negative feelings reflect a suspicion that discovering the truth about Santa marks a first step for children along a road to independence from their parents. Cyr (2002: 1327), though, goes a step further, hypothesizing from this that the '[i]nitial belief in Santa might be an example of a myth inspired by parents seeking to fulfil their own infantile needs' and that as children stop believing in Santa these needs increasingly remain unsatisfied and it is this that causes parents to feel sad.

Alongside these investigations into how the belief in Santa develops, psychologists have also questioned whether the belief causes any long-term psychological issues. In particular, they have

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asked whether there are any noticeable negative psychological effects accrued as children learn that their parents have lied to them about Santa (Sereno, 1951). We might, Nelms (1996: 243) points out, expect that when children find out that their parents have lied to them about the existence of Santa they would 'have trouble trusting their parents in the future'. In this regard, there are some psychoanalytic case studies where Santa has come to embody hostile feelings towards family members for patients suffering from severe festive anxiety such that thoughts of Santa can trigger bouts of neurosis and depression among female patients who unconsciously hope Santa will bring them a penis (Boyer, 1955; Eisenbud, 1941). Yet, according to Nelms (1996), the fear that children will suffer future health problems because of Santa is not supported by any real world psychological evidence. Nelms (1996: 243) reports: 'I thought over my years of professional experience working with children and parents, and I couldn't think of one time when I had been asked as a nurse if children should believe in Santa … that's unusual if this belief can have such long-term consequences'.

The psychological literature concerning Santa, then, offers us an overview of the vicissitudes of children's beliefs in Santa. These beliefs, while dynamic, have been shown to follow relatively stable patterns. First, children accept Santa is real then they come to acknowledge that Santa does not exist but continue to act *as if* he does. By highlighting the role of parents in instilling this belief, the psychological studies of Santa show us that alongside children's maturing causal reasoning skills parents and other cultural sources can exploit children's desire for presents to condition them to act out a belief in Santa. While this has not been shown to result in long-term psychological damage, it has been speculated that it has consequences later in life as adults use Santa to fulfil their own infantile needs.

Sociology and Santa: the meaning and experiences of Santa

Alongside the psychology literature sociologists have also explored Santa. Hagstrom (1968), for instance, focuses on the social function of Santa. Like many of the psychologists reviewed above, he (1968: 253) acknowledges that 'the process by which disbelief develops' is important and takes as his starting point the notion that Santa, whether we believe in him or not, has very real effects for children and adults. He (1968: 247) tells us: 'Although the figure of Santa Claus may have an important psychological meaning for children, this is only a small part of his meaning for adults'. Returning to some of the most influential figures in social theory, primarily Freud, Marx and Durkheim, Hagstrom asks what they would have said about Santa had they said something about him—which they did not. From a Freudian perspective, he posits that Santa may be a representation of our relationship with our fathers. Santa is portrayed as 'a consistently benevolent father image toward whom affectionate and dependent feelings may be expressed', unlike our real fathers who tend 'to be punitive' and demand respect and fear as well as love and affection (Hagstrom, 1968: 247). This, Hagstrom (1968: 247) asserts, helps us to explain why Santa is popular in societies 'where fathers and mothers both express affection toward children and where they both order children about'. Inspired by Freud, then, Hagstrom (1968: 251) proposes that Santa supplies parents with an outlet for aggressive and affectionate feelings they have towards their children but are unable to express in an unmediated form.

Picking up the idea that Santa is not truly understandable if we limit ourselves to looking at children's beliefs but only by looking at Santa through the lens of the family, Thompson and Hickey (1989) offer us less speculative research on the vicissitudes of the belief in Santa. They argue that Santa must be analysed in the contexts in which he is encountered. Conducting their research in Santa's 'favourite hang-out' (Thompson and Hickey, 1989: 371)—the shopping

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mall—they offer us ethnographic evidence demonstrating the ways people interact with Santa when they visit his grotto. They (1989: 374) find that, in this context, Santa is a 'stationary prop' for parents and children. The person dressed as Santa is irrelevant as long as they are wearing the correct outfit. The ways that people use and interact with the Santa prop are structured by age and gender. Young children are 'routinely' taken to see Santa by their parents but often 'sleep through the entire process' or, if they stay awake, are extremely 'fearful' of Santa (Thompson and Hickey, 1989: 377). Indeed, a 'common scene at all of the malls studied' by Thompson and Hickey (1989: 378) is 'a crying child being coaxed, coerced, or otherwise cajoled into sitting on Santa's lap for a photograph'. Slightly older children can be bribed with sweets and treats. Yet 'in some cases young children's fear could not be overcome, and the child would leap off Santa's lap and run screaming back to the safety of a parent' (Thompson and Hickey, 1989: 378). In contrast, children aged between five- and nine-years-old 'enjoyed interacting with Santa and treated him as if he were real' and the more these children 'became committed to the fantasy, the more the actors responded in kind' (Thompson and Hickey, 1989: 378). So even though many children in this age group appear to have 'outgrown their belief in Santa' they continued 'to play along as if they believed Santa was real … to get a reward and publicly demonstrate their conformity' (Thompson and Hickey, 1989: 379). Thompson and Hickey (1989: 379–380) explain:

> Children who suspected or knew that they were not truly interacting with Santa Claus but did not publicly disclose it, were demonstrating their conformity to adult expectations, and anticipatory socialization which prepared them for later role performances as adults. As such, children could publicly confirm the fact that they were making satisfactory progress towards becoming acceptable social persons.

The final group of children that Thompson and Hickey discuss is teenagers. For teenagers, 'presence of Santa Claus' in the shopping mall, an environment where they are beginning to express themselves as young adults, 'poses a threat to their identity' (Thompson and Hickey, 1989: 380). In order to reassert this identity, teenage girls respond by 'being openly flirtatious in a way to accentuate their budding womanhood' while boys respond 'by either ignoring or openly mocking the Santa fantasy' (Thompson and Hickey, 1989: 380). These traits towards Santa continued among adults. Like teenage boys, adult males are 'passive, detached, or at times almost hostile to the Santa Claus fantasy' (Thompson and Hickey, 1989: 381). In Thompson and Hickey's study (1989: 382), they 'avoided' interacting with Santa 'and refused to even acknowledge his existence'. In contrast, adult women, like teenage girls, interact with Santa often supporting 'the fantasy by overacting' (Thompson and Hickey, 1989: 381). Adherence to these gender roles among adults, though, is relaxed in the presence of a child. Thompson and Hickey (1989: 383–384) explain:

> In the presence of children, men's behavior was transformed, and like women, they typically acknowledged the Santa Claus fantasy. Adults are fully aware that Santa is a commercial vehicle, but in the presence of children, most suspend their cynicism and disbelief. To the casual observer, adult behaviors in front of children are pretty much the same … These parents acted as true believers in Santa's presence both to secure a good photo, and to teach their children proper behavior.

As these contributions to the sociology of Santa indicate, the literature emphasizes that Santa has a social meaning beyond creating wonder and joy for children. Santa has a meaning for adults too and it is this meaning that, in part at least, may help us explain why adults encourage their children to believe in Santa. Alongside these meanings, though, Santa has also been shown to help us perform particular social roles. This is most clearly illustrated in Thompson and Hickey's (1989)

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observations of teenagers for whom Santa is both a reminder of their childish innocence, a threat to their fledgling status as adults and an opportunity to reinforce that status.

The psychoanalysis of Santa

Combining the research from the psychological and sociological literature on Santa we can identify two curious features of the organization of Santa. First, these literatures show us that the belief in Santa does not develop as the unveiling of a lie but rather a movement into holding two ideas about Santa—one that allows us to enjoy him as if he were real and another that acknowledges that he is not real (Sharon and Woolley, 2009). This means that both adults and children who know that Santa is not real are able to 'suspend' their disbelief at various times (Thompson and Hickey, 1989: 384). Second, the psychological and sociological literatures highlight the role that parents play in constructing their children's ideas about Santa. They support the original belief in Santa by rewarding behaviour that demonstrates that their children believe in Santa. This has led researchers from both disciplines to question the function of Santa not only for children but also for adults. In the two proceeding sections, I ground these observations in psychoanalytic theory. In particular, I will turn to Freud's work to explore the ambivalence and narcissism of the belief in Santa.

Before venturing on this analysis, though, it is worth saying a word or two on the use of Freud's ideas within organization studies. Freud's writings have informed much work within contemporary organization studies (de Board, 1978; Gabriel, 1999; Gabriel and Carr 2002; Sievers, 1999, 2008). Even though the relationship between psychoanalysis and organization studies is not limited to Freud's work—as recent engagements with the writings of Lacan and Žižek, to pick but two examples, illustrate (Driver, 2009, Jones and Spicer, 2005)—Freud's influence over the psychoanalytic literature means that among discussions of other psychoanalytic theorists within organization studies Freud's ideas, concepts and categories invariably come to the surface (Gay, 1988). Moreover, Freud's (1927b) concept of fetishism, which, as we will see, is particularly relevant to understanding of the organization of Santa, has been developed recently by organization studies researchers including Böhm and Batta (2010) as a way of exploring instances where people within particular organized settings refuse to believe what they know.

The ambivalence of truth

We have seen that when children conclude that Santa is not real they do not rely on enlightened causal reasoning skills alone. Instead, they begin to see behind an image of Santa that had been forced on them by their parents even if they do not act on this new knowledge. As they grow older, especially in their teenage years where they struggle to secure their adult identities, they begin to express sexuality and hostility towards Santa. They are no longer happy to conform with expectations about how they should behave both because they know that they will get presents even if they do not believe in Santa and because they no longer want to act as children. Then, as teenagers grow into young adults, these feelings subside. Creating joy and wonder at Christmas becomes more appealing and Santa seems like a good idea again. As Nelms (1996: 243) puts it, 'there is a part of that belief that's still there' for adults 'not the story per se but the belief in the wonder and joy' of Christmas. What Santa shows us, then, is that it possible for our belief to split in two—it is possible for us to know that something is not real and still believe it is when we want to.

Freud (1927b: 156) observes a similar process, in which the 'attitude which fitted in with the wish and the attitude which fitted in with reality existed side by side', in the context of psychoanalytic therapy (1937, 1939), our sex lives (1927b, 1937) and religions (1939). Exploring how Freud

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works his way through these examples provides us with a foundation for understanding the vicissitudes of the belief in Santa and helps us to explain the function of Santa for both children and their parents which, in turn, will help us to make sense of the organization of Santa. Therapy, sex and religion are areas of our lives in which Freud (1939: 7), as an adherent to enlightenment ideals, believed that 'the clarification of a set of facts may be expected to bring us a gain in knowledge'. But, building on experiences both inside and outside of his clinic, Freud (1937: 288) came to agree with the adage of a 'shrewd satirist of old Austria' called Johann Nestroy that 'Every step forward is only half as big as it looks at first'. Freud (1937: 229) explains: 'Of all the erroneous and superstitious beliefs of mankind that have supposedly been surmounted there is not one whose residues do not live on among us to-day … One feels inclined to doubt sometimes whether the dragons of primeval days are really extinct'.

For example, having undergone psychoanalysis in which a patient has recognized their neuroses and taken responsibility of their traumas, Freud expected his patients to be cured and his work as an analyst to be complete. But what Freud (1940) discovered as he gained more experience of therapeutic work was that things rarely worked out this way. As Gay (1988: 304) explains in his biography of Freud: 'Clinical experience showed that for the analysand to know something intellectually is never good enough'. Indeed, Freud (1940: 233) recognized that he was able to increase patient's knowledge of their psychological lives but, despite the claims set out in some high-profile case studies, he could not alter anything fundamental about a person with any certainty. Consequently, Freud (1937: 229) concludes 'that analysis, in claiming to cure neuroses by ensuring control over instinct, is always right in theory but not always right in practice'. Likewise, Freud (1937) observes that after children have been educated, often uncomfortably, in the facts of life they 'know something that they did not know before, but they make no use of the new knowledge that has been presented to them'. Children continue to believe that babies come from storks even though they know it is not true. Freud (1937: 234) explains:

> We come to see that they are not even in so great a hurry to sacrifice for this new knowledge the sexual theories which might be described as a natural growth and which they have constructed in harmony with, and dependence on, their imperfect libidinal organization—theories about the part played by the stork, about the nature of sexual intercourse and about the way in which babies are made. For a long time after they have been given sexual enlightenment they behave like primitive races who have had Christianity thrust upon them and who continue to worship their old idols in secret.

Freud (1927b) finds that even within our enlightened sexual relations this process is no less pronounced and it is here that Freud begins to construct his theoretical explanation for the phenomena. Of particular interest here is the castration complex. Freud tells us that young males overcome the fear of losing their penis, a fear brought about upon seeing female genitals, by creating a specific kind of substitute that Freud (1927b) calls a fetish. This helps them to accept the new information they have about the world (in this case, that women such as their mother do not have a penis) while at the same time retaining that original belief in a sublimated form (in the idea that they did have a penis but it has been cut off). Freud used this idea to explain the prevalence of foot fetishes—where the foot has taken on the sexual attraction typical of the sexual organs. He suggested that the foot is most likely the first thing a young boy sees after his initial view of the female genitals. In fetishizing the foot, then, the fetishist establishes a memorial for the female's lost penis. Freud (1927b: 154) explains:

> Yes, in his mind the woman has got a penis, in spite of everything; but this penis is no longer the same as it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, as it were, and now

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> inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor. But this interest suffers an extraordinary increase as well, because the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute.

Through this process of creating a substitute, then, a young male will have ‘retained’ his initial belief while at the same time ‘also given it up’ (Freud, 1927b: 154). As Freud concluded in his famous analysis of the Wolf Man, by creating a substitute, a young boy can accept the new information while also not accepting it. To put this another way, we can say that through establishing a fetish a ‘denial is not a refutation, an innovation is not necessarily an advance’ (Freud, 1939: 131). For this reason, Žižek (2009: 61) claims that ‘what fetishism gives body to is precisely my disavowal of knowledge, my refusal to subjectively assume what I know’. He (2009: 65) explains that ‘the fetish is the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth’. Here, British psychotherapist Adam Phillips (1993: 93) confirms that: ‘Just as it is the sign of a good theory that it can be used to support contradictory positions, it is the sign of a good fetish that it keeps incompatible ideas alive’.

Freud (1939; 1913) also finds evidence of such fetishism among crowds, communities and cultures. For example, in his (1939) attempts to explain the origins of the Jewish religion Freud explores the possibility that a group of people might collectively reject one religion, accepting that it is irrational, superstitious, hypercritical or even ridiculous, only to establish a new religion in its place that is equally as irrational, superstitious, hypercritical and ridiculous as the old one. From this Freud (1939: 118) observes that ‘in the course of the development of humanity sensuality is gradually overpowered by intellectuality … It further happens later on that intellectuality itself is overpowered by the very puzzling emotional phenomenon of faith’. Freud explains that when a group of people both reject sensuality in favour of intellectuality and reject intellectuality in favour of faith there is always an element of wishful fulfilment at work. He (1939: 118) tells us that people tend to ‘feel proud and exalted by every such advance’ in their intellectuality. But he (1939: 129) also cautions that ‘our intellect very easily goes astray without any warning, and that nothing is more easily believed by us than what, without reference to the truth, comes to meet our wishful illusions’.

It is at this social level that a number of researchers have sought to combine Freud’s work on fetishism with that of Marx. For Marx (1976) capitalism depends upon a particular form of fetishism—commodity fetishism—in which individual consumers see the products of human labour as subjects in their own right. That is, they stand in relation to them not as things that people make but as things that just are. Commodities, according to Marx (1976: 169), are born from this ‘magic and necromancy’. Here is perhaps not the place to go into a discussion of the similarities and differences between Marx and Freud—a long ranging discussion (Pietz, 1985) that includes contributions from Adorno (2001), Baudrillard (1981), Bauman (2007), Billig (1999a, 1999b), Miklitsch, (1996, 1998) and Mioyasaki (2002) to name but a handful of examples. It is, though, worth acknowledging that within the organization studies literature, this discussion has been picked up in recent work studying enlightened consumption. As Fleming and Spicer (2005: 187) put it, ‘the enlightened consumer knows that the pair of Nikes they purchase is made under sweatshop conditions, but in the last instance act as if they did not know this’. Böhm and Batta (2010) explain this inconsistency by arguing that modern consumers are fetishists who overvalue their consumption at the expense of their concerns for the conditions under which the commodities they consume are produced. They know about exploitation in production and they are concerned by it but they act *as if* they did not know when it suits them.

But Freud does more than show us analogous phenomenon to commodity fetishism. He provides a framework that allows us to explain fetishism as a feature of our mental organization (Gay, 1988).

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His work provides us with an account of the libidinal economy as opposed to the political economy of commodity fetishism. In this regard, early on in his writings, Freud recognized that human psychology is characterized by a certain kind of hypocrisy. Love, Freud found in his clinical work, was often a mask for hatred, pain hid pleasure. Drawing on the work of Blueler, Freud called this 'ambivalence' (1916–1917: 478). He (1916–1917: 495) concluded that emotional ambivalence, where affectionate feelings are mixed with hostile ones, 'is dominant in the majority of our intimate relations with other people'.

The concept of ambivalence, then, was a way for Freud to show that humans tend to hold conflicting ideas about the world simultaneously. To explain the psychological mechanics of how this ambivalence works we can turn to Freud's later work. He (1927a) tells us that our knowledge of the external world, our concept of truth, is determined by our ability to know it—that is, by our mental organization. We have to reduce our experience of the world through 'generalizations, rules and laws which bring order into chaos' (Freud, 1937: 228). But our ability to discover consistent generalizations is limited by the internal inconsistency of our psychological apparatus such that 'we cannot avoid falsifying [the world], especially if we are dealing with processes of development and change' (Freud, 1937: 228). At various stages in his writings Freud conceives these inconsistencies in different ways ranging from the differences between the ego and the id (Freud, 1923), the conscious and the unconscious (Freud, 1900), the reality principle and the pleasure principle (Freud, 1920) and the life and death instincts (Freud, 1924). Irrelevant of the labels he applied, though, he was convinced that we make errors in our judgements about the world because there is an inconsistency between a side of our psychology that faces outward for its basis of what is true and another side that faces inward to what we want or need to be true. In addition, as we will see below, Freud thought that not only do these components of our psychology face different directions but they develop their capacities at differing speeds.

So, from Freud we inherit an understanding of truth as defined by both the external world and our internal wishes. But we also inherit an understanding that our internal wishes are, themselves, contradictory, or ambivalent, because that is how our psychologies are organized. This understanding of truth as inherently ambivalent goes some way to explaining the vicissitudes of belief in Santa highlighted in the psychological and sociological literature. It allows us to conceive of truth not as a progression or enlightenment but as a circuitous process that runs off course at the same time as it develops. The road of truth, we are able to see, is not a one-way street. Indeed, for Freud (1923), the development of the psychological agency, the ego, that looks out into the world, does not mean the end of that part of our psychological apparatus that looks inward, the id. They are related, Freud (1923) points out, like a rider and a horse. All is well if the rider can command the horse to go in the direction that they want it to, but at any moment the horse, with its greater power, might throw the rider and go wherever it wants to go dragging the rider with it.

The narcissism of truth

In addition to mapping out the relationship within our psychologies, Freud's account of ambivalence also links together a notion of truth with the idea of wish fulfilment, which, as we have seen, has been shown by Freud and others to play an important role in the process of fetishism. To explain this link, and relate this idea to our analysis of Santa, we can turn to Freud's later works. In several of these later texts Freud develops the idea that before we develop full sensory capacities we live, as far as we are concerned, as self-contained entities. Freud called this the stage of primary narcissism. He argued that children begin their relations with the world auto-erotically—that is, they seem able to gratify their desires themselves. This is, of course, an error in judgement. It is an

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impression caused by undeveloped sensory capacities that would allow the child to recognize the role of others in providing for them. But even as we develop these capacities, traces of our earlier relations continue. As Gay (1988: 339) summarizes, Freud thought that our initial narcissism 'is never wholly overcome'. Instead, it is a template for all our later relations as our primary narcissism is passed over on to the external world around us. Gay (1988: 364) continues:

> Love, Freud reminded his readers, begins as narcissistic self-absorption, and then, climbing a complicated ladder of development, links up with the sexual instincts to provide a sizable repertory of gratifications. And hate, a pendant to love as its opposite and its companion, provides still more material for diversity. No wonder that ambivalence, the coexistence in the same person of love and hate for the same object, is the most natural and most common of conditions. Humans, it would seem are destined to navigate among opposites: love and hate, love and indifference, loving and being loved.

The idea of ambivalence and the lasting influence of early narcissistic object relations can help us to explain the ambivalent nature of truth that is at work in the two truths we hold about Santa. Specifically, understanding that narcissism, broadly conceived as self-love, lies behind our ambivalent ideas of what is true helps us to explain why children report a feeling of pride when they find out the truth about Santa (even though they have also been found to make little use of this knowledge) while their parents report feelings of sadness when they find out that their children have learned the truth about Santa.

For Freud (1939: 118), the feeling of pride on the part of children is explainable because there is something instinctually satisfying about learning something new. As we have seen, Freud observed that we feel 'proud and exalted' by advances in our intellect irrelevant of what we do with that knowledge or what the knowledge is. Indeed, Freud (1939: 115) tells us that: 'All such advances in intellectuality have as their consequence that the individual's self-esteem is increased, that he is made proud—so that he feels superior to other people who have remained under the spell of sensuality'. Yet as Freud (1939: 116) acknowledges: 'It is not obvious and not immediately understandable why an advance in intellectuality, a set-back to sensuality, should raise the self-regard both of an individual and of a people'. He (1939: 116) points out that the 'abstention from satisfaction' because 'of an external hindrance' is never felt to be pleasurable. We might think, then, that advancing into the adult world of deferred gratification would be unappealing to a child (Freud, 1920). However, Freud (1939: 116–117) continues:

> whereas instinctual renunciation, when it is for external reasons, is only unpleasurable, when it is for internal reasons, in obedience to the super-ego, it has a different economic effect … it also brings the ego a yield of pleasure—a substantive satisfaction, as it were. The ego feels elevated; it is proud of the instinctual renunciations, as though it were a valuable achievement.

The important thing for Freud, then, is that finding out something new and accepting the reality principle pleases a particular part of our psychological apparatus, the super-ego—the psychological embodiment of our culture and society—and this is what makes us, or our egos at least, feel pride when we learn something new even though another part of our psychological apparatus, the id, loses out. The ego, on this reading, has lived up to the super-ego's exacting demands. There is, in other words, a narcissism involved with what children take to be true if it appeases the model set by the superego.

But this might leave us wondering why parents report experiencing feelings of sadness when they see their children learn the truth about Santa. If the child's narcissistic wishes are fulfilled, accounting for their pride, we might suspect that their parents feel sad because their narcissistic

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wishes are not. This might be because, as Freud (1939: 115) tells us, our pride at learning something depends on feeling 'superior' in comparison 'to other people who have remained under the spell of sensuality'. Indeed, we must consider the possibility that parents force the belief in Santa on to their children in order to feel superior to their children. In other words, they create people who do not know something that they know in order to feel the narcissism of superiority by misinforming their children. Certainly, Freud (1914), and to a greater extent Billig (1999a) in his re-interpretation of some of Freud's most famous cases, uncovers unconscious narcissistic and hostile attitudes between children and adults. Freud (1914: 91) tells us: 'Parental love, which is so moving and at bottom so childish, is nothing but the parents' narcissism born again, which, transformed into object-love, unmistakably reveals its former nature'. In short, there may be an element of sadism in the relations between parents and their children that is facilitated by Santa—by convincing their children that Santa exists, parents feel elevated because they know the truth.

However, for both children and parents there is a less direct narcissistic appeal to the organization of Santa. Identification is a powerful psychoanalytic process that facilitates narcissism beyond the stage of primary narcissism. When studying examples of mourning and melancholia from his own experiences and the experiences of his clinical patients, Freud (1917) argued that our sense of self is strengthened by identifying with others—particularly those in positions of authority and people we love. By taking on characteristics of these people we are able to respect and to love ourselves as we respect and love them and vice versa to love them as we once loved ourselves. This is, of course, a foundation of the famous Oedipus Complex which tells us that children identify with their parents by becoming independent from them. In this regard, concluding that Santa is not real on our own may mark a step on the path towards adulthood and independence but it allows us to become more like the adults we identify with. Perhaps this helps us to explain why children report feeling pleased that they have discovered the truth about Santa on their own.

Parents, though, are able to identify with *both* their children and with Santa thanks to the organization of the belief in Santa. In terms of identifying with their children, Freud (1914: 91) tells us that parents are 'inclined to suspend in the child's favour the operation of all the cultural acquisitions which their own narcissism has been forced to respect, and to renew on his behalf the claims to privileges which were long ago given up by themselves'. Simply put, this would mean that parents want their children to believe in Santa because they never completely wanted to stop believing in Santa when they were children but were convinced by their own narcissistic wishes at the behest of their super-ego as this allowed them to become more like the adults they saw around them. Accordingly, Freud (1914: 91) tells us that parents desire that their children:

> shall have a better time than his parents; he shall not be subject to the necessities which they have recognized as paramount in life. Illness, death, renunciation of enjoyment, restrictions on his own will, shall not touch him … he shall once more really be the centre and core of creation—'His Majesty the Baby', as we once fancied ourselves. The child shall fulfil those wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out.

So parents might provide their children with misinformation to make Santa real because it allows them to feel the narcissism of superiority. At the same time, through the process of narcissistic identification with their children they can go back to a world where Santa was real—a world where they ignored the demands of their super-ego.

In terms of identifying with Santa, Freud (1939: 128) argues that 'the believer has a share in the greatness of his god'. On this point, in his work on group psychology, Freud (1921) works through the mechanics of these narcissistic identification between leaders and followers (Cluley, 2008). He

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suggests that followers often elevate their leaders to an unrealistic height, attributing superhuman powers to them because, through their psychological identifications with them, this allows followers to elevate themselves. Applying this argument to the relationship between parents and Santa we can, perhaps, explain why parents are willing to overplay their own belief in Santa. At the same time as they identify with their children, parents may want their children to accept Santa as a fantastic entity because, as they are key players in constructing Santa, they share in his powers. Their identification with him is played out in their children's belief. In this sense, parents not only use the truth about Santa but construct the truth to meet their own narcissistic desires (Freud, 1939: 129). Parents' fantasies about Santa, or about their children believing in Santa, are wish fulfilments as much as children's desires to believe in Santa are. As a result, when children stop believing in Santa they are marking both the death of parents' power over them and killing Santa as an object parents can identify with.

So, through Freud's psychoanalytic theory of narcissism we gain an understanding of the psychodynamics of the organization of Santa. This helps us to explain a number of the findings presented in the psychological and sociological literature on Santa. First, we can begin to understand why children report feeling pleased when they come to the conclusion that Santa is not real. Even though this involves learning that their parents have lied to them it also allows them to confirm their identification with adult authority figures and this provides narcissistic satisfaction. Second, we can begin to understand why parents report feeling sad when their children begin to reject the idea that Santa is real. Through their identification with Santa, the magical entity that they have created, they have been able to share in Santa's ability to spread wonder and joy. They have also been able to share the experience of joy and wonder that they have helped create by identify with their children. In so doing, their own narcissistic desires to provide a perfect life for their children—their little emperors, who's narcissistic needs are never compromised—have been fulfilled. Finally, we have seen that parents can use their children instrumentally to satisfy their own narcissism. This provides an explanation for parents' active role in misinforming their children about Santa. This allows parents create a world for themselves and for their children that conforms with the world both of them wishes existed.

Summary: the organization of Santa and the problem of fetishism

As we saw at the start of the article, organization theorists have become increasingly interested in exploring how our desires influence our ideas about the world and how they then impact upon how we organize the world (Duchon and Drake, 2009; Stein, 2003). In exploring this interest theorists such as Böhm and Batta (2010) have turned to psychoanalytic theory as a way of explaining how our ideas about what is true are often distorted by what we want to be true. In particular, the concept of fetishism has proven a useful way of thinking through this issue. The organization of Santa can, I have argued, also be understood through this concept. Moreover, in using psychoanalytic theories, especially the ideas of narcissism and ambivalence that, according to Freud at least, lie behind fetishism, we can offer explanations for some of the curiosities observed by psychologists and sociologists who have studied Santa.

Working through the psychological and sociological literatures concerning Santa we have observed some distinct organizational features. We have seen that Santa is organized in a very specific way that first establishes the idea that Santa is a real person only for him to be revealed as a living myth that, as people grow older, is both enjoyed *as if* it were true while at the same time is generally accepted to not be true. We have seen, then, that parents play an important role in the organization of Santa and draw on other cultural sources to convince their children that Santa is

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real. We have also seen that parents encourage their children to behave as if Santa was real, rewarding them for demonstrations that confirm that they believe in Santa. In this regard, Santa conforms with the Freudian concept of fetishism. We know he is not real but, as both children and adults, we suspend our disbelief in order to enjoy him as if he was real. Here, the psychological and sociological literatures on Santa show us that the belief in Santa is not a fallacy invented by children who eventually find out the truth. Instead, parents play a key role in convincing their children to believe in this falsehood and even feel sadness when their children stop believing in it. These bodies of literature show us that children are resistant to the Santa myth and that adults rely on a range of external sources to support it. Moreover, these literatures also show us that it is not the case that once a child learns the truth about Santa they banish the Santa myth forever. Even though they should know that Santa is not real, they continue to act as if he is. This is because the idea that Santa is real is not overturned but augmented with the idea that he is not—a case of fetishism.

Accepting Santa as an example of a fetish, we have then worked our way through the mechanics of ambivalence in order to provide a psychoanalytic account for how a fetishish can survive and have progressed to explore the possible reasons why parents might organize Santa in this way for their children. We have seen how this is facilitated by the nature of our psychological apparatus for knowing the world which is, itself, conditioned by our internal wishes and desires that construct a particular world for us. Here we turned to the concept of narcissism. We have highlighted how parent's narcissistic desires can be met through their role in the organization of Santa. In particular, we have highlighted how identifications with their children and with Santa allow this to happen. Through this analysis, then, we can add a further example to the organizational psychoanalysis literature that shows how we organize the world, including the economic world, to meet our psychological needs. As Freud puts it, we have seen that nothing is more easily believed by us than what we want to be true. We have explored this with relation to Santa but we have also seen that these fetishistic patterns of behaviour continue to play an important organizational and social role well beyond Christmas.

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