

My Experience with Projection and Projective Identification

Having the Vision of the Ideal and working at learning how to live it in the presence of others seemed to be reasonable, but it turned out that it was not reasonable. This insight was the outcome of exploring Projective Identification.

From the therapist's viewpoint, what is important then in working with our clients is that we are actually willing to receive, process, digest and effectively identify with our client's projections so that we can deliver them back in manageable, bite-sizeable portions for reintegration in a safer and healthier way for growth and healing to occur.

A while back, really years ago as I am editing this article, I was in a training session at the mental health clinic where I worked as the Volunteer Coordinator and the concept of Projective Identification was presented. At the end of the session I picked up a handout on the topic and in reading it many connections were made for me; connections of great import.

Here's an example of Projection. A client who struggles in his marriage has shared with his therapist that no matter what he does in his relationship with his spouse nothing works. Because this creates feelings of inadequacy, a feeling that the client cannot accept, the client carries a burden of feelings harboring resentment toward the spouse. Regardless of the multiple variables in their relationship the client actually has come to believe his wife is the problem as he has concluded that she is insensitive, cold, and distant. The client by blaming the spouse for being unresponsive shifts his feeling of inadequacy to her. This is Projection.

Now let's see how projection evolves into Projected Identification. In the following session the therapist introduces the challenge that feelings have on relationships eventually focusing on the feeling of inadequacy. In exploring this feeling together it soon becomes evident that the client is showing that the situation is becoming very uncomfortable. The therapist, being empathetic picks up on this and reflects this insight back to the client. Instead of acknowledging this development the client abruptly becomes defensive and reactive. In doing so the client diverts the focus from himself to the therapist by blaming the therapist for being unable to help him and in doing so is challenging the therapist's professional skills. The client in accusing the therapist as being inadequate has now projected his repressed feeling of his own inadequacy on the therapist as he did earlier with his wife.

In experiencing this projection, the therapist acknowledges to himself that the client is projecting the identity of inadequacy. Instead of denying the accusation, the therapist engages a therapeutic strategy by consciously accepting and identifying with the projection and openly commences to explore the feeling of inadequacy with the client. This is Projected Identification. In the exploring process, the therapist begins to process the feeling and then shares with the client that the possibility of being professionally inadequate is not a pleasant feeling and it is difficult to live with. Furthermore, the therapist shares that facing the feeling of not being really good can be depressing and at times overwhelming. The therapist then shares that when becoming too self-critical it is easy to become very discouraged and this can lead to feeling that it's time to get out of the profession.

After a moment or two of reflection the therapist then begins to reshape the interchange by sharing that while being really good is difficult and takes years of effort that most of the time the challenge has been worthwhile. The therapist then relates that it helps to remember what the

motivation for entering the profession. This often leads to feeling that it has been worthwhile. Hoping to be helpful to others and in the process to learn more about life was the original goal and that has over the years been very rewarding. Learning and improving professionally has not always been a smooth ride and yet overall there are more moments of meaningful exploration and growth. The therapist then shares the hope that in time the improvement of professional skills will improve sufficiently to be of more value to the clients.

In this effort to relate honestly with the client's projection the therapist is role modeling the processing of disturbing feelings in a good way. The therapist then relates that exploring relationships is best achieved through a collaborative effort. By suggesting that by working together as a team, they can then support each other in seeking the pathway to the client's interest in coming to an understanding of the challenges that must be met in order to seek a resolution in the relationship with his wife.

The therapist shares that therapy is really about learning how to process the context of situations that come to be challenging if not overwhelming. By now, the client is feeling more comfortable with the therapist as a result of the open manner by which the accusation of incompetence was dealt with. They get into a discussion of the concept of projection and this highlights how the therapist processed the client's feelings of the projection of the therapist's inadequacy. Hearing this from the therapist provides the client with a model for processing his own conflict with his feelings. The therapists by personalizing the projection demonstrates that it's all just part of life and life is all about learning helpful means of understanding difficult situations. The culmination of the exploration of the dynamic of Projected Identification is educational in nature. This transparent engagement may lead to a further opening for the client such that the client may then feel safe enough and have a greater degree of respect for the therapist to allow the therapist to guide the discussion to the client's underlying feelings of inadequacy. This may lead to the client and the therapist developing a few interventions that once learned may help the communication in the client's relationship with his wife.

I hope that my understanding of Projection and Projected Identification is accurate. I feel that as I write this I need to apply it to my own life so that I can evaluate whether I have grasped its principles. Therefore I will explore my own experiences and track the influence of projection within my relationships. This part was not fully developed the when I first wrote this article.

I experienced what I believe was serious child abuse from birth to the time I left home at the age of nineteen. I experienced physical abuse in the form of at least weekly beatings by my mother from my earliest memories up to the age of eight. (My earliest memory was crawling behind a couch and hearing that people were looking for me.) The beatings stopped when I was eight years old and finally big enough to break the cycle when I was able to restrain her when she was trying to beat me with my music stand. After that she beat me up psychologically making every attempt to humiliate me with my small circle of friends. This I didn't escape from until I left home. I did "run away" often, but always returned home, which just supported the endless cycle of pain and fear. I experienced endless intimidation from my older brother and also physical bullying. My older sister lied on me frequently when I was young resulting in beatings. I also experienced what felt like sexual abuse up to the age of six. These experiences created a deep sense of fear, anxiety, depression, and deep rage, which on rare occasions burst forth. For me these repeated stressful situations caused my body to be flooded with adrenalin and over the years of my childhood I subconsciously identified the experiencing of adrenalin with pain and suffering. When I got into sports, adrenalin, which was supposed to boost my energy levels and the ability to focus instead struck me with a deep sense of apprehension. This emotional

experience somehow reversed the intended effect of adrenalin resulting in my becoming completely enervated and disoriented. Of course this was a detriment to my physical effort.

All of this abuse had other consequences. I existed in a constant state of vulnerability and hyper-vigilance. Even when there was no real threat like when there was kidding around, I felt put-down. Kidding is a normal and healthy interaction between children and between adults and children. However, experiencing this created in me feelings of self-doubt and heightened states of weakness. Even constructive criticism felt like persecution. Feelings of inferiority permeated most of my relationships. I always had just one good friend and in looking back I must have been placing a huge emotional expectation on that friend. Given my anxiety about intimacy as a result of the abuse by my family, which should have been my haven against such behavior, while I felt that my friend liked me, subconsciously I kind of doubted the positive feelings were sincere.

I was unsuccessful in any of the psychological defense mechanisms that individuals employ to protect themselves from such feelings. I was totally vulnerable to the feelings and suffered physically with nervous twitches and eventually colitis. I suffered emotionally in that I always doubted myself and took other's views as being more legitimate. I spent a great deal of time alone walking in the hills above our home. At night I was obsessed with fantasizing on sexual ideation. I do not believe that I was even able to initiate a transference of my feelings onto any one through projection, so weak was my sense of self.

This prison of self-doubt and intense feeling of inferiority were shattered the first time I smoked marijuana when I was about twenty. For some blessed reason all my senses, which were repressed as much as my feelings, were liberated from that moment on. It was as though a blind, deaf, and mute person suddenly and unexpectedly obtained their senses. It was overwhelming and actually has taken many years to learn to neurologically integrate the sensory stimulation, which was initially a painful, though an exciting and energizing overload.

Not only did I awaken sensorily I also awakened intuitively, intellectually, and I guess emotionally as well. The prison walls and the prison social structure within which I lived were cataclysmically destroyed. It lay in ruins, and didn't even know it. However it didn't completely disappear. No indeed. It became a ghost, dead, but not knowing that it was dead because of its abrupt obliteration. In this ghostly state it drifted in the recesses of my mind. At times it reached for me and I actually responded for years before I realized that it was not entirely within the same dimension that I now lived. Once I eventually became aware of its nature, its ability to influence me faded, unless I later chose to visit it as I did when I wrote my autobiography. Of course during this experience I visited it, for that was where my past was and it was there within which my history resided.

In this awakening I became aware of more than myself. I began to see the context within which my suffering was experienced. I became aware of the issues and the life's pressures of my parents and older siblings and this empathy opened me up to the pain and suffering that my family experienced in their lives. This insight somehow alleviated some of the stress and tension I had been experiencing. While their behavior toward me was unacceptable, the crushing emotional dynamics I felt diminished as I came to the insight that abusing those who were weaker was a mechanism for empowerment resulting in the ability to gain a sense of safety. So, regardless of their power over me, they must have been feeling very vulnerable to need to hurt me. I wondered what they experienced to bring this sad situation into being but they were never open to looking into themselves for that level of revelation. Then I began to extend my vision beyond my family to society itself. I came to perceive that the powerful in the world manipulated social dynamics to reinforce their feelings of domination that was essential to them in order to

feel safe. I concluded that it was out of their fear of others that led them to initiated famine, disease, and war to weaken and thereby control people. This awareness was quickly overwhelming and stayed so for some time as it inadvertently reinforced my feeling of vulnerability. It angered me at still feeling weak and in my anger I identified with those people and groups who were suffering from this type of debasement. In this sense I projected myself to connect with the oppressed and in doing so I didn't feel so alone. Instead I felt that at last I belonged.

During the years of my breaking free of my cocoon of suffering I began to wonder how the world could be in this state if the Creator was a force of Good. I lost any residual sense of safety that remained in me from my belief in G-d as I concluded that the Creator couldn't be depended upon to correct this inequity. With that development I became committed to discovering the source of conflict that stripped people of their humanity. Of course this included me. I dedicated my life to standing up for not only myself, but also for others. In this way I was projecting my deep personal drive for the experience of hope, care, love, nurturing, security, safety, sharing, respect, and so on into the world of possibility. Needless to say, the reality hasn't been able to justify or sustain this projection. Repeatedly the vision was embarked upon only to disintegrate time after time. However, each time, I felt I had learned a bit more and looked forward to the next cycle in which I believed that I could bring into it what I had learned in the previous cycle. So projection can also be positive even if it is unconscious.

In some form of self-awareness, I was unconsciously using this fabricated vision of how life could be, to feel better about myself and my condition and yet also it was a subconscious means of keeping me safe from people. I didn't know that somehow I had created a dynamic projection to keep people away from me when in my mind I have been convinced that what I was exploring and learning was exactly those aspects of a relationship that were essential to the living of unconditional love, life's spiritual ideal.

By actually projecting a life of "personal growth," and perhaps even started to live aspects of an ideal way of interacting, it became more and more clear to me, itself a delusion, that living the ideal was possible. It provided me with a feeling of relevance and I became committed to sharing these skills, perceptions, and values with people I met, even just casually. This sense of purpose led me to becoming very attractive to women especially, and yet mysteriously far less to men. As long as my relationship with the women was on a friendship level it excelled with feelings of mutual appreciation. However when one of these friendly relationships became more intimate I continued to openly maintain platonic friendships with the other women. Yet these friendships with other women caused jealousy and anxiety in my relationship with my then girlfriend. I proclaimed my innocence of interest of any intimacy with our friends, but because the woman I was then intimate with came from that group of friendships, it was very threatening. She was unable to manage her own sense of insecurity and projected that on me and our friends. At that time in my development of social sensitivity I was not yet able to comprehend that aspect of human nature. Being not very strong internally and knowing nothing of Projected Identification I reacted and blamed her for doubting me. I was yet too immature and could not see that inherently within my ideal construct of friendships with women, I had built in failure as well.

I was unaware of the depth to which my childhood experiences scarred me. I had believed for years that I was healing myself of that terrible and endless traumatization. In fact, or at least to some degree, that scarring was permanent, and I didn't realize that. Deep inside my psyche was an absolute block against being in a lifelong intimate relationship, my family's

perversion of intimacy being so threatening. There was a built in time frame in any intimacy. Just a matter of time until it went off. Completely blind to myself.

It was at some point that I become aware that my drive for a better me and a better world was a consequence of taking on the responsibility of my childhood abuse. I had somehow subconsciously blamed myself as being guilty of causing my beatings and degradation. This I can now see as my identifying with the projection of my abusers, a different aspect of Projected Identification. As a child, I unwittingly absorbed their projection without any way of processing it and so it integrated into my personality. I guess that's what children do, who are like sponges soaking up parental role modeling and also innocently soaking in and integrating their parents' projections. It seems to me that children are doing this throughout their childhood years and this absorption of the parental projection builds up and encases their innate personality, thereafter acting like a filter for all incoming and outgoing social interaction.

So there I am acting out the projections and simultaneously experiencing deep conflict as I intuitively struggle to throw off this cloak of digested projections. However throughout childhood and into adulthood I was completely unaware of this parasitic life form within me and thus to escape that guilt I would do penance by seeking to improve myself endlessly, resulting in my inability to accept any less effort in others. In fact I had assumed the parental projection of disappointment in my inability to fit into their unreasonable expectations. Failing to please them it was then my fault as to this then triggering their punishment of me. In subconsciously accepting this guilt I entered into the Projection thus totally identifying with it, however without awareness and without the skills to process the incursion.

In becoming the identity of their projections I made the same projection on friends and girlfriends. Most of my girlfriends were healthier than me and were able to block the projection, but a few who had also suffered abuse assumed my projection and identified with it. The short term relationships were with the healthy women and the long-term relationships that went on for years were the vulnerable ones. Probably that's why we connected so deeply. We each could identify in our loneliness another person who had a need to be needed. But even these relationships that went on for years finally disintegrated when I decided that there was no hope for them to improve sufficiently as to fit into my sense of the ideal. It was exactly the same dynamic that had been repeated for endless generations within my family if not all humanity. It was becoming aware of the destructive demands for perfection and its inherent inhumanity that finally awakened me from the obsession with attaining it.

The Creator and Its Creation was imperfect. So what? Life is imperfect. One is imperfect, and its OK. It's the way it is. It was in the acceptance of this that opened the pathway to accepting my, should I call it illness and the illness of all of creation. In this acknowledgement is the key to opening another door to my prison and in stepping free, so does the hold of the projections diminish further.

Projection is what it is and its influence is strong in my life and in my relationships. Projecting and accepting other's projections and identifying with them is such a destructive influence on relationships. Why isn't this taught early on? Finally becoming aware of its presence in me has helped me to enter into the process of acquiring the discipline and skills that allow me to manage its affect and the alterations to my personality. In this manner I am both the client and the therapist of my own mind. So, in this sense, a personalized therapeutic Projected Identification in which I am able to process the identification of the projection and share it back with myself in an understandable means. I hope that this makes sense.

Schiesel/Projected Identification

I have come to feel that the challenge is not only personal; it is cultural in that the society's context may not allow for the acknowledgment of the experience. Becoming vulnerable as a result of trauma was so subtle to me. This wave of PTSD that is engulfing our veterans is only the visible part of the iceberg of our cultural trauma. This cultural imperative to be rugged individuals only leads to our isolation, and our fear of people who may see the humanity in us. Carrying the weight of this alone is too great for anyone. This isolation reinforces the presence of the scarring and this gives the foothold to the dynamic of identifying with the projections aimed at me, you, and everyone. This just leads us to protect our own psyche by projecting our indoctrinated misconstrued perceptions on those for whom we care and thereby satisfy the compulsion to empower ourselves. This kind of cultural projection leads to social strife and eventually to war. Ow!

In conclusion I have the feeling that Projected Identification while a wonderful tool in the hands of an experienced therapist, is a natural phenomena that is unwittingly experienced within a one-to-one relationship, a family relationship, a group relationship, and in a cultural relationship. One can even become a victim of recycling the identification with a projection within one's self. It is a powerful yet an unrecognized dynamic of life and obtaining a grasp on it may be essential to eventually and collaboratively developing relatively healthy relationship(s). At least that is my hope. I hope that my hope is reasonable.

What's your feeling about all of this? Let me know at Jonathan@outfar10.com.