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# Projective processes and how to survive them.

## Introduction

This lecture is concerned with the unconscious communication that goes on in groups using projective processes and how these can be brought into conscious awareness and worked with. The projective processes, which I am going to try to describe today, interact to produce the mirroring which is essential to Group Analysis. Often we talk about transference and counter transference. Identifying the projective processes, which go on in a group, is simply another way of looking at a group. I like to think that I can look at a group at different times through different lenses. Sometimes I would simply listen to what is overtly said, other times I might concentrate on transference references and others I would be thinking in terms of unconscious communication through projective processes. Today we are doing the latter. There may well be people here who are deeply sceptical about all this magical talk about the unconscious but can I ask you to suspend disbelief just for this session.

## Splitting and defence mechanisms

A variety of defence mechanisms enable us to survive the vicissitudes of life, denial, splitting, regression etc. These are fine unless they become entrenched ways of behaving or limit our personality development. Generally these operate at an unconscious level that can be manifest in a group if one is open to seeing it. Splitting is the most relevant defence mechanism for us today. This is an unconscious

process by which positive and negative feelings that are too difficult to be held together spring apart and become projected onto different people. The clear split between good and bad relieves the anxiety of doubt in the toddler's world. "Daddy is bad mummy is nice" "I love mummy I don't like Daddy."

Parents are the first targets for the projection of our polarised feelings and passions. Other relatives, playmates, pets, dolls, friends, neighbours, office colleagues and so on follow. Their real selves can be obscured from and by the projector in different ways. Both good and bad feelings are dealt with in this way. The individual concerned might unload a baggage from the past onto a colleague. That sets the scene for destructive anger. Often however the luggage one cannot bear to own and carry contains the best parts of one. Such denied aspects of us become the beautiful clothes with which one dresses up others. Since it obscures the reality of the other this idealising projection leads to destruction too. The roots of both destructive anger and destructive idealisation are in the mechanism of splitting.

## The origins of splitting

### Normal splitting

The immature infant has to organise his chaotic experience, and the ego achieves a primitive structure by splitting into good and bad. This allows a good relationship to a good object to develop, by splitting off destructive impulses, which are directed towards bad objects. An alternation between idealised and persecutory states follows. If development proceeds successfully, the ego is strengthened to the point where it can tolerate ambivalence and the split lessens to usher in the depressive position. However initially the breast that feeds is the object of love, the breast that deprives is the object of hatred. The depressive position is an important developmental advance in which whole objects begin to be recognised. The breast, which frustrates the infant, is the same one that gratifies him. The result of integration over time is ambivalence, both love and hate for the same object is felt. This results in feelings of loss and guilt, which facilitate necessary mourning.

The paranoid schizoid and depressive positions are not fixed and one moves between the two. What I want to look at is how groups can help

individuals to deal with the destructive splitting and projection that limits the move to the more mature depressive position.

## Wondering about splitting

The group is a mirror we can use to see how we are in the world and how our view of the world is coloured by the use we make of these splitting and projecting processes. The analytic group wondering about the splitting can be creative, allowing the person to engage in dialogue with disowned parts of themselves. You will have come across the authoritarian character masquerading as a liberal who has problems owning their own intolerance and rigidity, and who creates an atmosphere of tension where everyone is terribly careful what they say. The real problem with splitting and projection is that instead of the frightening feelings simply being inside the person they are then also out there in the world persecuting them.

The more contained and held one feels the more one is able to be oneself and resist the impulse to split. Patients need us to hear their unconscious communications, to hold the feelings and passions for them, and give them back in a more manageable form that they can recognise and struggle with. If the group can contain the feelings and frustrations of its members they can be thought about rather than evacuated through projective identification.

## New group and child simile

It is helpful to think of projective processes not simply as defence mechanisms but also as a primitive but effective means of communication. Infants cannot use words and rely on a form of projective identification to ensure the mother meets their needs. The hungry baby communicates with the mother by crying this induces a feeling of distress in the mother, which she alleviates by providing food or comfort for the child. Our patients stimulate feelings in us in the same way.

A common unconscious fantasy among new patients is that an analytic group will provide a womb like experience where they can regress and be totally understood without having to explain anything. When frustrated in this they experience feelings of hate towards the depriving

mother and group. These can either be talked about or evacuated through projective identification. The group looking at the projections involved and putting them into words usually works through this beginning stage with great care.

This same process is needed throughout the life of the group. At a superficial level a group may appear to be communicating freely, but close attention will often reveal a group still struggling with the dilemma of how to say what it thinks, and still wishing that just for once it could be given the cup of coffee with the right number of sugars without having to ask for it.

## Not knowing

I'd like to say something about the Group Analytic idea of not knowing. Because most of what we are dealing with is unconscious and because we have 8 people who are of necessity giving us the minimum of information, we simply cannot know what is going on and I think it is important to remember that. A client who crashed his car on the way home from the group may not mention it. However when Group Analysts talk about staying with not knowing I don't think they mean they are happy to rest in blissful ignorance. I think it is a sense of fishing in the unconscious and letting information fall into its own pattern rather than risking premature closure. This whole area of projections is a rich area for these fishing expeditions, but one really does have to approach them without memory or desire. One can perhaps know more unconsciously than consciously. Having said that I am now going to try and be as specific and didactic as I can be as this is a lecture.

We are likely to spend most of our time talking about the problems associated with managing these powerful processes but it is very important you do not go away with the idea that projective processes are in any way undesirable in themselves. It is these processes that form the bedrock of how we communicate with one another. Projections followed by reality testing are the basis of empathy and of beginning to know what someone else is feeling. It is the projective and introjective processes, involved in mirroring, which make possible a reworking of early material in a group, as one sees oneself, mirrored in

the group.

## Mirror.

One cannot take it for granted that people want to see split off denied parts of themselves.

Show anyone a photograph of himself or herself and he or she always hates it. Mirrors are almost as bad. Perhaps the worst was when I used to travel on the old northern line when the windows reflected back a dreary distorted image of each of us and a real mirror came as a pleasant reassurance. Our image of ourselves derives from the mirrors our families and wider society have held up to us which like the northern line glass are designed to suit their purposes and idiosyncrasies. By each comparing the glass we see the world through we can begin to identify some of the distortions that have developed over the years. Groups can act as a plainer glass with some of the distortions picked up through our family experiences ironed out. The patient uses the group as a mirror that she can hold up to see herself as the group simply gives feedback, about their reaction to her. However the magical mirrors of fairy stories are probably nearer to what really happens. A kind thoughtful group member watching someone else who is being sweetly reasonable, when it is quite obvious from the train of events they should be hurt and angry, sees, with extraordinary illumination, the falseness of her own occasional suffocating kindness and how much simpler it would be if she could be direct. Another group member sees the person who is the mirror image of him or herself, who holds some of the repressed projected unrealised bits of them. The group can mirror the whole family or work setting and allows a reworking. Seeing others in the group mirror struggling with intimacy opens up the possibility of struggling oneself

I need to be sure we understand what I mean by projective processes. I had wondered about bringing a friend along and asking him simply to sit up here. With little else to do I assumed you would begin to relate to him in your own mind and endow him with all sorts of attributes. My assumption would be that you would each notice different things about him and form different attitudes but that what you made of him would tell me something of you. These would be processes of projection and he might well remain oblivious to them. Projective Identification

involves a more active interaction between the projector and the recipient.

## Avoiding the critical parent

Many people are desperate not to be like their parents. Someone who grew up with very critical parents is likely to be very ashamed of their own critical aspects and try desperately to keep them hidden from others and themselves. One way of doing this is through Projective Identification, provoking someone else into being critical and then sitting back reassured that they are not the critical one but still having to deal with the criticism which is now both internal and external. I am sure you have all been with colleagues who are furious about something but instead of expressing it go around behaving in such a way that you get angry with them and then they can say 'I do not know what you are getting so up tight about'. You have expressed their anger for them and they and you are not destroyed by it. The important thing is that it is a way of dealing with parts of ourselves, which we wish to deny or distance ourselves from for whatever reason. There is a big element of control and manipulation in the interaction all be it unconscious. The projective identification involves a fantasy of controlling from within, like a glove puppet, and there is a concomitant fear of being controlled. It is not that people actually transfer feelings from one person to another but simply that they behave in such a way that you end up feeling the feelings which they can then deny or distance themselves from.

## Projective processes in groups

I would like to describe some of the different ways projective processes manifest themselves in a group. Clearly there are a multitude of configurations, A split off feeling can be projected into part of the group e.g. the founder members, the men or the women in the group, one particular individual or the therapist.

### The conductor

If the conductor is the recipient they can monitor this by their counter transference reaction as one would in individual psychotherapy. One graphic example occurred when I spoke calmly to a group member

and my voice came out in was extraordinarily angry tone. The group member was most unwilling to look at whether this anger, which I did not believe was mine, might have something to do with the group member. However it was a turning point. For the first time we had a measure of the strength of the denied feelings the group member and the group were up against.

Equally the therapist can carry the group members' good feelings. Patients come to therapy looking for help and in order to believe the therapist can help they end up idealising the therapist. The patients do this by projecting onto the therapist their own strengths. This has some perceived advantages the therapist is seen as wiser kinder more intuitive etc. The therapist is then more able to tackle the very real problems the patient is bringing. However it is not really in anyone's interests as the patients are left depleted and denying their ability to help themselves or anyone else. If the therapist is not very careful to resist the projections of omnipotence and feed back the projections the patients are left considerably weakened, disabled and dependent.

Another way the therapist carries projections for the group is between groups. Anxiety is probably the easiest to illustrate this with. If a group is at a critical phase maybe it is near a break, or it is a new group or the group that has just lost a member, there is going to be anxiety about. It is natural for the group conductor to be anxious but what is really interesting is to explore how ingenious groups are in getting the conductor to carry the group's anxiety as well as their own. A new group has every reason to be anxious but may behave as cool as cucumbers and launch into all sorts of exciting material so that the conductor becomes more and more anxious about how they were going to work with it all. If the conductor can notice just how cool they are, it might help the conductor to realise that although the anxiety feels like the conductors anxiety, much of it belongs to the group. Simply drawing their attention, to how odd it is that they are not expressing any anxiety, will probably be enough to allow the group to become realistically concerned about their situation and free the therapist from carrying all the anxiety.

## Members

Naturally most of the projective processes go on between the members of the group with endless possibilities for the open

expression of denied feelings. Group members will readily accept roles they are unconsciously assigned, provided such a role complies with their own fantasy. At the simplest level one member might relate to another as if she were her big sister who always knew best and did not listen. Simply allowing this to go on and each eventually coming to understand and respect one another allows the projections to be worked with and withdrawn. However it can also be a subtle continuous process, which results for example in one member of the group carrying feelings of inadequacy for the group and eventually leaving. Groups are often reluctant to give up their scapegoats and will resolutely deny any identification with the identified patient. Groups are very talented in identifying who will hold what feelings for them. A member who sees themselves as a bit of a rebel will probably be set up by the group to act out their aggression towards the conductor. This leaves the rest of the group free to disapprove, thereby disowning the bit of themselves that would like to be 'rebellious'. Others will be allocated the role of crying, or talking excessively.

## Whole group

Feelings, which cannot be contained, are projected into the whole group. At one point it might be idealised perhaps in the face of an ending, or it might be seen as a frightening dangerous place (a mirror of the members inner worlds) that they do not wish to tolerate and hence stay away.

## Therapist and patient

All psychotherapy patients are asked to tread the delicate balance of regressing sufficiently to get in touch with unconscious processes whilst retaining the adult functioning necessary to deal with it. This is particularly so of people in group analytic treatment who have a clear role as therapists to one another. The group, which provides an empathic container with a high level of good faith, tolerates considerable frustration and projective processes form part of the creative matrix rather than a means of evacuating uncomfortable emotions.

In a simple example a person projects their wish to be brought into the group in such a way that others feel the need to include that person.

The compulsion the others feel to ask 'Sara how are you this week' is an indication that projective processes are at work rather than simple kindness or curiosity. It is not a very healthy position for the quiet member since they are not only projecting the need to be included but also the strength to bring them in which they endow other members with. The danger is that if people resist the impulse to include them they are left high and dry and further weakened.

If the group can become aware of this and wonder about the way the member got what they needed, they may be able to help the patient re-own their own strength and begin to move forward, to more mature forms of communication, such as asking, rather than staying in the terribly vulnerable dependant position the baby is in. Most exciting is when members are able to notice feelings that tend to take them over and in the very special atmosphere of a group resist acting them out and instead talk about them. For example two members who consistently wind each other up.

## **Processing excessive projective identification**

Highly disturbed members, who tolerate this frustration less readily, may need to have the projections processed by other members more quickly so that the anxiety does not become overwhelming. Where a member employs projective identification to a limited degree, the group can provide the ballast to absorb the projection digest it and give it back in a modified form. This is a very effective pathway for psychological growth. The problem with using Projective identification to communicate is that one is so dependent on the recipient. The intuitive group analyst who is sensitive to and able to process the projective identification may feel it is enough to interpret the projective identification consistently. However to avoid a state of unthinking dependency, equal attention must be paid to the patient learning to think the unthinkable so that unwanted parts of the self can be tolerated and put into words.

Excessive projective identification is an attack on thought processes, destroying dialogue and needing very particular attention. I am sure you have experienced groups where one or more member holds the group to ransom and it seems impossible to carry on thinking. The

challenge then is to get sufficient emotional detachment to be outside what is going on while at the same time staying in contact with the primitive feelings. A group can project all their rage and fears of sexual violence into the group as a whole and it can become a rather scary place to be. When it peaks it is the group conductor's job to provide the containment. One way to allow thinking to continue is to distinguish between the fantasy and the reality and insist that it is more important to understand what is going on than to continue acting it out. The group conductor can then suggest that while all the group did was to talk, maybe what was experienced was something of what each of the members brought to the group and the pain of their inner worlds.

## **Containing the projections.**

Bion suggests that the primary function of a group is to be a good container for the feelings and frustrations of its members. He says that projective identification and thinking are alternative ways of expressing these frustrations and that the better the container the more thought will evolve and the less evacuation will be necessary. Please do not confuse this intuitive thinking with intellectualisation.

The more someone feels held, the more they are able to be themselves. I would like to start with a baby and its feelings of rage with the mother who is not perfect. A mother who is reconciled to the fact she is not perfect may be able to hold these feelings and tolerate them. However a mother who lives all the time with the fear that she is herself too damaged to be a mother will find these feelings intolerable and they will resonate with her own feelings. She has two equally unsatisfactory ways of responding. One is to deny the feelings and project them out onto society. The other is to try to deal with them and inevitably be flooded by them, so that the baby experiences her as completely destroyed by his feelings. I think the same happens with group therapists. We can hold and tolerate a lot but there will be issues that are too close and we have a duty of care to our patients and ourselves not to collude in this unhelpful experience. Patients who have had mothers who have failed them will inevitably recreate this scenario in the transference with the therapist and we have to resist re-enacting it. The role is to hold the feelings long enough to find a way of feeding them back but also of being able to model not taking on more

than we can handle.

## General course lecture

It seems to me that one of the challenges in these lectures is whether anyone remembers what has been talked about. To help us with this and to try to focus on some of what has been covered I have brought along a few props.

### The container

I thought this was rather a wonderful shoe bag. The group as a container needs to have plenty of room for manoeuvre flexibility but also good boundaries. The more difficult feelings a group can contain the greater will be their ability to think and reflect and the less they will revert to projective identification.

### The ball

I am not going to risk trying it but I am pretty confident that if you throw a ball towards a group of people one of them will catch it almost on a reflex. Anyone who has been to a pantomime will see the way people elbow each other out of the way to catch the revolting sweets thrown into the audience. What I am suggesting is that feelings are just the same. If split off disowned feelings are bouncing around in a group someone will pick them up. They may get stuck with them or others may join them in playing with them as the feelings are passed around and the group explores what can be done with them.

### A baby

Sadly the Institute did not stretch to providing me with a real baby because if we had one here we would be in no doubt about the power of projective processes as a form of communication. The baby would doubtless be screaming to get out of this place and I would be utterly unable to resist doing what was necessary to meet the baby's needs. His crying would mobilise in me feelings commensurate with his feelings of life and death such that I would have to do what he needed,

in order to reduce my own levels of anxiety, which of course in turn reduce his. The challenge to group therapists is to know how to handle communication which uses projective processes. Also to sensitively allow the group to regress sufficiently to get in touch with primitive material while moving forward to more mature ways of communicating which are less dependant on the recipient i.e. Dialogue and free floating discussion.

## **A glove puppet**

I think my main interest in doing this lecture is because running groups is hard work and anyone who underestimates the power of unconscious processes in groups is open to quite serious attack from the group's split off unmanageable emotions. The glove puppet is here so that next time you are in a group and you feel powerless and controlled by the group, instead of thinking you are a useless group conductor you might have an image of my glove puppet. It might allow you to stop and think 'What are the unconscious split off feelings that I am both feeling and acting out and how can I give them back to the group?' People are amazingly reluctant to do this. I have come to the conclusion that it is somehow safer, as a conductor, to think that you are temporarily a bit useless than it is to acknowledge the power of the unconscious forces that the group has stirred up, and the real fear of the feelings that are being denied.

## **The mirror**

## **The image**