

Projection is one of those terms that frequently gets bandied about but often is poorly understood. A way to think of psychological projection is to think of it like having an unconscious inner image of self which we then project onto others much like a movie is projected onto a screen.

A simple example of projection would be that a person gets upset, frustrated or angry over a co-workers dis-organisation. From an objective viewpoint, the co-worker matches the criteria for dis-organisation it is factual. The person cannot help but wonder why the co-worker is so disorganized at work when they are so organized. Yet when this person returns home after work, there are clothes strewn all about the place. Clothes on the couch, on the dining table, etc all making for a messy environment. In this example, what is not fully owned is the persons own disorganization in other areas of their own lives. The person can see it in other people, but not in themselves.

One of the common difficulties people experience is they have the expectation that their projections must be an exact match. In the previous example, the expectation might be, disorganization at work must be matched with disorganization at work. If it is not then there is no projection is a common misconception. At a very fundamental level, human beings are pattern-matching machines (that s not all they are though). But this pattern matching algorithm does not need to be an exact match. It just has to be close enough.

It is pertinent to note that one of the main impediments to seeing our own projections is that they will contain a kernel of truth when projecting onto others. The person who sees that someone is disorganized at work sees something factual. Because it is factual, it is easy to overlook how they themselves might be disorganized in other areas of life. When combined with the exact matching tendency discussed earlier, the obfuscation of psychological projection becomes relatively commonplace.

To summarize thus far:

1. Do not fall into the expectation of a perfect match. It only has to be in the same ballpark.
2. Seeing something factual in others does not mean that there is no psychological projection. In fact, most projection has a ring of truth which is attributable to others. It is just that we do not see the same phenomenon in ourselves.

Carl Jung who was particularly fond of Taoism (as am I) tended to split things into dichotomies and projection was no exception. Psychological projection has two facets which could be thought of as the dark and the light side of the unconscious. The dark side is

commonly known as the shadow. The light side is known as psychological gold.

Both of these mechanisms serve the purpose of keeping disavowed, unpleasant, disconnected parts of ourselves from reaching consciousness. Just because these aspects of ourselves are in the unconscious does not mean that they do not influence behaviour and choices in life.

For instance, a person who experienced abandonment issues in childhood might unconsciously select people who will abandon them as an adult. The projection might take the form of seeing the person as all good initially – psychological gold. The filter becomes narrow and red flags are overlooked or missed entirely. Later in the relationship when it becomes obvious that the other person has some commitment issues of their own (shadow), the abandonment triggers become intensified and the person's own neediness comes to the fore. The way out is for the person to do some work on their abandonment issues and becoming more aware of how their unconscious selection process often leads to relationship troubles.

The assimilation of projection material is not only central to knowing ourselves but also can lead to a more productive and fulfilling life. In the above example, the person might begin to select people who are more capable of having a healthy adult relationship. In addition, working on their own inner issues makes them a more viable partner for others.

The lighter side of the unconscious can work in ways which are detrimental to our being. For instance, imagine that growing up someone is consistently told they are worthless. One of the likely outcomes is that as the child matures into an adult they are going to have great difficulty believing that they are worthwhile individuals. This is because being told they are worthwhile individuals clashes with the unconscious image of unworthiness which they hold of themselves. Projection in these types of cases might take the form of seeing positive attributes in others but not seeing these same attributes in themselves.

Think about the spiritual field and in particular how seekers often hold gurus in high esteem. Frequently, what the guru is saying goes unquestioned – the words and sayings become the template for spiritual progression or enlightenment. We could understand this phenomenon as a form of projection. Rather than seeing the good in themselves, it is attributed to the guru often to such an extent that they may be held in a god-like status. Further, the responsibility for change is thrust onto the guru or teacher which ultimately can only disempower the seeker. This sort of scenario highlights how the light side or the gold can be projected onto someone else.

We only need look at Nazi Germany to gain an appreciation for how destructive the light side of the unconscious can be. At the heights of Nazi Germany, nearly all the good was projected onto Adolf Hitler and members of the Nazi Regime. Hitler became a kind of beacon for righteous indignation. The projected gold worked in tandem with the shadow, where all the bad was delegated to the Jewish people and other minority groups. The inability of the German people to understand their own shadow and gold resulted in some of the greatest atrocities humankind has seen. It is only through the unintegrated individual unconscious that the cultural milieu of cruelty can thrive.

When we unconsciously project it can lead to many issues later in life. Consider the following example of shadow projection. A child grows up with a cruel tyrannical father. Later in life, they may project the quality of tyranny onto authority figures but largely remain oblivious to their own tyranny and capacity for cruelty. But somewhere and somehow that capacity for tyranny and cruelty will leak out. It may be in relation to a pet, or with neighbours or family members or at work as some of the possibilities.

A common question that crops up in my work as a psychotherapist, is how does someone recognize their projections. The answer is in others, but there is a couple of factors that go along with that.

A good rule of thumb to follow is that if you are being irritated and it has a high level of intensity surrounding it, then something is occurring at an unconscious level. This does not mean that projection is going to be the culprit every single time. But at the very least we should examine what is going on for us where the first port of call is to look towards projection.

Another good rule of thumb is to see if you are seeing the other person as a type of caricature. For instance, in the projection of gold, the other person is very frequently viewed as the answer. They are not viewed as a rounded person who has some flaws and some virtues. The degree to which we have a myopic vision of others is another good indicator that some form of projection may be occurring.

The more aware we become of how we view others the greater the chances that we can see our own patterns of projection. If we can see the pattern which we have learned over the years we can begin to undo it so that it has less of a hold on us. Shadow work in this context is the art of tracing back what we see in others to ourselves. This requires a great deal of self-awareness and reflection.

Here is another article which might be of interest when trying to understand projection

[Projective Identification](#)

If you have any questions or comments feel free to post a reply to this article.