

Projective Identification

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Like any theory, the Kleinian concept of Projective Identification (PI) represents an abstract explanatory pattern for concrete phenomena. In the course of the development of the PI concept, different emphases emerged: Bion sees PI as an original, pre-linguistic way of communication – which is used, for example, in borderline disorders. Current Kleinian authors have abandoned the idea of a communicative phenomenon ubiquitous in human coexistence, in favour of a view focussing on defence mechanisms, and thus no longer make a fundamental distinction between projection and projective identification. Kernberg’s object relations theory points us to possibilities of understanding phenomena in borderline disorders, and of understanding group dynamic effects also for use in the treatment process, especially with the help of the concept of projective identification. Furthermore, the concept of PI can make escalating individual, as well as group conflicts more understandable. On the other hand, the concept points to possible ways of establishing human freedom in everyday interpersonal interaction and relationships outside a therapeutic context, this by dispensing with projective identification and applying a concept of genuine response.

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Projective identification is a widespread phenomenon in the clinical context as well as in everyday life. Recognizing, understanding and dealing with it can help to better orient oneself in the irrationality of human relationships. At the same time, projective identification is one of those psychoanalytical concepts that can be used to better understand the phenomenon of the unconscious itself and its effects on each individual as well as on any a social context.

Projective identification as a concept

Projective identification as a concept should serve to better understand concrete intrapsychic and interpersonal phenomena. At the same time, however, concepts must always be filled with content, which makes them understandable and applicable.

According to the author’s understanding, concepts are only justified if they positively influence understanding and action – and not as a theory per se.

Current international development of the concept from approx. 2010 onwards:

From around 2010 onwards, Kleinian psychoanalysis tends not to make a distinction between projective identification and projection itself (cf. Spillius 2012).¹

Valuation: according to this circumstance, the concept of projective identification remains under psychoanalytic interpretative sovereignty. Projective identification continues to be understood as a predominantly pathological defence mechanism – and not as a means of human communication and/or – in the less favourable case – interpersonal manipulation and the exercise of power.

Reception of the concept in Germany

In Germany, there was almost no reception of the concept of projective identification until the 1990s, and thus only at the same time as the development of specific concepts of borderline and trauma psychotherapy.²

At the end of the 1970s, considerations arose for a congress of the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA) in Germany in 1981; it then became clear that a corresponding congress in Germany was impossible. The background to this was that what Kleinians described as terrible (intrapyschic) fantasies had become reality in Nazi Germany (cf. Hinz 2012).

A congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) on projective identification was then held in Jerusalem in 1985.

Important persons and their contributions to the development of the concept of projective identification

Important thinkers and their contributions to the concept development are:³

¹ Hinshelwood's (1993) entry on projective identification in the Dictionary of Kleinian Psychoanalysis is considerably longer than in Spillius & O'Shaughnessy's (2012) *New Dictionary of Kleinian thoughts*, written some twenty years later – which may point to the concept's declining importance.

² For example, in R. Klußmann (1993) – who taught psychotherapy as a university lecturer at the LMU Munich – there is a page reference in his textbook on psychotherapy after consulting the index under projective identification with then only two lines of text there.

³ Other people could certainly be mentioned here, such as Ogden (cf. Ogden 1979), but he will not be discussed further here.

- Edoardo Weiss⁴, who first used the term projective identification in the 1920s;
- Melanie Klein⁵, who described projective identification as a defence mechanism in “psychotic patients“ in 1945;
- Paula Heimann⁶, who described second-order countertransference in 1950;
- Roger Money-Kyrle⁷, who saw projective identification as an essential agent of psychoanalytic work;
- Wilfred Bion⁸, who emphasised the communicative character of projective identification and created important preconditions for understanding projective identification with the two concepts of container <-> contained and of L-, H- and K-links in thinking;
- Neville Symington, who⁹ saw the renunciation of projective identification as a necessary precondition for interpersonal freedom.

Foundations for understanding projective identification on the basis of Kleinian psychoanalysis

Melanie Klein – Projective Identification as a defence mechanism

Melanie Klein focused on the intrapsychic and described projective identification as an inner-psychic defence mechanism (Klein 1946), with the help of which affects and self-states are evacuated into another person or an “object“. The aim of evacuation is to control, harm and/or possess or even destroy the object.

⁴ Edoardo Weiss (1889-1970), Italian psychoanalyst who left the Italian civil service because of the required Italianisation of his Jewish surname and the required entry into the Fascist Party, and then emigrated to the USA because of the Italian racial laws under Mussolini.

⁵ Melanie Klein (1882-1960), Austrian-British psychoanalyst who emigrated to England in the 1930s and became Anna Freud’s main opponent.

⁶ Paula Heimann (1899-1982), German psychoanalyst who emigrated to England with her child in 1933 after Switzerland granted residence to her husband, but not her. Close collaborator of Melanie Klein, but belonged to the Middle Group of British psychoanalysts from the end of the 1950s. The reasons for the separation from Kleinians are yet mostly unknown.

⁷ Roger Money Kyrle (1908-1980), British psychoanalyst with a philosophical-anthropological background.

⁸ Wilfred Bion (1897-1979), Indian-born British psychoanalyst who developed his own models on the basis of Kleinian thinking.

⁹ Neville Symington (1937-2019), Portuguese-born, British psychoanalyst who turned to psychoanalysis after studying Catholic theology and whose substantial work took place in Australia.

Like all defence mechanisms, projective identification serves to regulate the intrapsychic state.

Paula Heimann – transference and countertransference

Until the fundamental work of Heimann (Heimann 1950), the counter-transference of the analyst/therapist was primarily seen as a reaction in the context of the therapist's own neurosis or biographical background. By means of one's own analysis, the counter-transference was supposed to be "purified", so to speak.

Heimann described another form of countertransference (CT) in the therapist, which could also be called 2nd order CT. This involves the therapist's perception of mental states of the patient,

- on the one hand due to empathic (outreach) ability (activity of the therapist), and
- on the other hand, via preconscious messages from the patient, which take place by means of projective identification, but can also be manipulative as a preconscious action.

A perception by means of 2nd order countertransference can be identified, because one's own condition is experienced as "different" and unusual – for instance as an affective reaction that one does not know in this way in relation to this particular patient (cf. Behnsen o.J.).

Wilfred Bion

Container-contained

All human relationship, according to Bion, is based on the Container-Contained principle (cf. Hinshelwood 1993b) – which means that there is a content that is held and received by something else – the container.

The principle of container-contained can be understood as the basis for the phenomenon of (psychic) evacuation described by Melanie Klein – with the help of which affects and contents are "excreted" or "handed over" and deposited in another person (as a container), usually the infant's mother on early stages of development.

L-, H-, K-links

According to Bion, all human psychic activity can be traced back to one of the three basic forms of "thinking": loving "L" - hating "H" - knowing

“K“, or to a differentiated connection of two or all of these “links“.¹⁰

Hating as a human activity is often denied, since hate is directly related to revenge and destruction. In a constructive form, the “H“-activity leads to self-efficacy, and in connection with L and K to cooperation.¹¹

Hate as a basic psychic activity is of decisive importance for projective identification because this “link“ is essentially active in it. Projective identification is connected with hatred, destructive fantasies, wanting to dominate.

Projective Identification and its communicative character

Bion (Bion 1959) assumes that projective identification is naturally inherent in us as a communicative, pre-linguistic process of the infant, needed to survive.¹² Projective identification is used as a recourse to this early process, especially in severe disorders such as borderline, or can be observed by the environment and the therapist or therapeutic team as a means to reach psychic equilibrium by externalization.

However, projective identification can also be used as a means of communication, for example when you want to „push something into someone“.

Pushing something into someone can be psychodynamically translated as:

- to evacuate/externalise
- by means of projective identification
- through imposed containment.

Pushing something into someone’s mind happens in conflict situations in order to

- relieve own affects (for instance in the form of a “reproach“),
- to bring the counterpart into an (unpleasant) state of affect, and/or
- in order to influence/control the other person.

The natural reaction to such a psychic move would be something like a spontaneous “What was that now?”

¹⁰ see also Lopez-Corvo 2003, The dictionary of the work of Bion, as an important reference work to classify and understand Bion’s sometimes confusing terminology, or R uth 2005a, Bion for Beginners.

¹¹ Interestingly to some extent quite the same as Ammon’s Constructive Aggression.

¹² In case projective identification fails, the infant recurs to adhesive identification as a rescue mechanism – described by Esther Bick in infant observation.

In intellectual “discussion“, intellectualized defences lead away from hatred as well as direct manipulation, so that only very subtle forms of projective identification can be identified.

Roger Money-Kyrle: Projective Identification as “communication“ in the therapeutic process

Roger Money-Kyrle describes that the analyst takes up aspects of the patient via projective identification, then processes and transforms them internally and returns them in a different form to the patient – but not as retrograde projective identification, but in open communication. Otherwise, it would be manipulation.

The following introjective identification of the patient then leads to a change in the patient – and this in a progressive control cycle.

Case vignette:¹³

One youth reported that he had “got drunk“ with other youths after school the day before. A preconscious event starts in the therapist – he has to bring his hands to his face, lower his head, close his eyes, and then a feeling of sadness arises in the countertransference.

The countertransference feeling is not communicated directly, but the patient is asked what he (the therapist) might have felt now. The patient’s answer: “I did something wrong! This is answered with a pointed reaction, similar to the previous one, now a denial by a slow, clear shaking of the head and a corresponding verbal expression.

The patient is further asked what he, the patient, had felt before getting drunk. “Boredom“. In the sense of a psychoeducational explanation, the therapist points out that he (the patient) would have to endure unpleasant sensations if he wanted to get to the bottom of his boredom and the feelings to be located there. The patient then meanders a little in the therapeutic dialogue and can finally refer to “loneliness“ and then also to “sadness“. It is now revealed that this was the feeling that was felt by the therapist during the therapist’s pointed gesture. The patient can now refer to his own feelings of loneliness and sadness of the last few days.

¹³ It goes without saying that in the context of publications, case vignettes are anonymized and represent a compilation of different patient encounters.

The case study describes the use of projective identification effective in countertransference, as well as the therapeutic reluctance to hastily evacuate these pre-linguistic messages back into the patient.

Projective identification as a communicative method of „manipulation”

Projective identification as communication wants to intervene “dominantly“ in the other person.

- Such a dominating intervention in the other happens under
- absence of acknowledgement and respect of the other, that means L.
 - absence of understanding, that means K.
 - using mastery, that means H.

Such communication aimed at mastery the other mind can be found in figures of speech of political extremes, or also in extreme psychological states.

Phenomenologically, this form of communication was quite often found in society during the Covid 19 pandemic. Due to the insecurities and threats, unbearable conditions were projected in the sense of an evacuation. Via introjective identification on the side of followers, these evacuated contents were absorbed, and the fellow travellers then passed on these contents via renewed projective identifications, that means evacuations – with the consequence of an echo chamber phenomenon.

In the context of the pandemic, it was ultimately impossible to say anything “true“ – since information and facts were largely either missing or uncertain. True statements were only possible when talking about one’s own subjective condition. All other statements were, to a varying degree, projections or the result of projective identification. The background to this was that the pandemic as an overall phenomenon triggered unbearable affective states of uncertainty, unpredictability and fear that one naturally wanted to evacuate – without there being a container for this that could meaningfully transform these contents in the sense of the bionic alpha function.

In the political sphere, there is always a “push in“¹⁴ concerning the political opponent – a move already named identified as projective identification.

¹⁴ In German: “reindrücken”

Donald Trump has made extensive use of lies as a tool, that is to say “push ins“ into the mind of others, and in doing so he has engaged in a deflation of the K-link, using H through belittling and humiliating.

During the election campaign ahead of the 2021 federal election in Germany, right-wing politician Alice Weidel¹⁵ said during a TV discussion in connection with the planned energy transition and climate protection “you can’t let an industrialized country run on flutter electricity“ meaning wind turbines. This contribution to the discussion leaves no room for constructive argumentation and empties the K-link (-K), contains snideness and self-aggrandisement (H), the counterpart feels uncomfortable and fends off (-K) – or identifies (by means of one’s own H). It is reserved for further investigation to show the connection between projective identification as a mode of manipulation on the one hand and the adhesive identification triggered in the follower on the other.

In everyday life, projective identification is found in communicative processes within the framework of affectively charged relationships (with projections) in

- regressive situations, for example in the relationship with the baby or in infatuation,
- in the case of speech comprehension disorders, since in such cases affects “without language“ predominate,¹⁶
- and in the everyday exercise of power to stifle “dissent“ – with the consequence of -K, -L, that means the absence and negation of knowing/wanting to know and love/attention.

If people seem “unpleasant“, this might find an explanation by projective identification. Through projective identification, such people “radiate“ their own states of affect and self, which the other person “does not want to have“. Subjectively, the recipient experiences a feeling of being controlled, which one wants to ward off.

In conflict situations, reproaches/aggression serve to evacuate one’s own aversive affect states into the other. Usually there is no successful solution, besides the submission of one of the opponents, unless mechanisms of projective identification and wanting to dominate are abandoned.

¹⁵ Alice Weidel is one of the main figures of Germany’s right winged party “Alternative für Deutschland“.

¹⁶ cf. R  th 2005, Receptive Language Disorders and Wilfred R. Bion „Learning through Experience“.

Projective identification in the therapeutic context

Projective identification in the context of borderline functional disorders can be explained by Kernberg’s object relations theory (cf. Yeomanns & Diamond 2011).

On the basis of split representations of self and object (simplified as a model: provider - persecutor - victim), projective identification is used to attribute roles and to induce taking over a role, which leads to merely a reaction in the absence of understanding of what is really happening.

A way out of these malignant processes of projective identifications is possible via

- countershaping¹⁷, which means not to react but to act in an unexpected way and with simultaneous stepping out of the imposed context, and via
- responding instead of reacting, the latter outlined especially by Symington (Symington 1995, R uth 2022).

Through these two means, the – usually pre-conscious – manipulations are “rejected“, that is to say “not accepted“.

In the group context of inpatient treatment, the ward resembles a stage, and the team – and possibly the fellow patients – mirror the patient’s different states of self and affect. Such phenomena of projective identification can also be explained by Kernberg’s object relations model: a “distribution“ of the patient’s inner states to different team members takes place, especially observable in the case of structural disorders, and possibly even as an indication of the presence of such a structural disorder (at borderline level of function).

Countertransference phenomena in a team via projective identification should be understood as “mirroring“ of the patient’s self-states through pre-conscious, identificatory assumption by the team’s members. In this respect, an “image“ of the patient’s inner world is created on the stage of the clinic ward and/or the team via projective identification. If this bringing to the stage is consciously taken up in the team in the case discussion, made “thinkable“ and fed back to the patient’s inner world, it can lead to an immediate change in the patient’s behavior, due to opposing projective identifications, as an unconscious communication with the patient.

¹⁷ German: “gegengestalten“

In terms of team dynamics, the “counter-transference analysis in the team“ (Rüth 2003) designed in this way leads to a relief for the individual team member and the team as a whole through

- allowing and tolerating affects and reaction formation (in the first step),
- raising awareness with classification of the confusion experienced and motivational clarification of the event (in the second step), as well as for the
- returning the team to work mode (in the third step),

analogous to a structural level-related integration work in the inner world of the patient.

Studies pointed out that unfavorable countertransference in a team (in the absence of sufficient processing) leads to negative outcomes (Kernhof et al. 2012)

Projective identification in supervision and Balint work

Projective identification is used in supervision and Balint work to “communicate“ what was previously unconscious – so that the Balint process or the supervisory process is ultimately about “uncovering“ unconscious messages with the help of countertransference processes (Schmolke & Hoffmann 2014, Seiler 2014).

Elsewhere (Rüth 2005b, Rüth 2009, Rüth & Holch 2012), this process has been described for Balint Group work as transforming bizarre beta elements (according to Bion) into “thinkable”, that means conceivable alpha elements – with active use of 2nd order countertransference and projective identification.

It should be noted that in the context of “parasitic“ relationships, a massive attack is made by means of projective identification on the containment function of the therapist (or the team) and on the ability to transform beta into alpha elements (Rüth 2019). Special techniques are necessary here in order to dissolve the entanglements that arise under such circumstances.

However, projective identification also takes place outside a genuinely therapeutic context: Obholzer & Zagier Roberts (1994) have brought together various authors in their reader on psychoanalytic organizational counselling and the unconscious at work. The authors address the phenomenon of projective identifications in institutions from different points of view. Halton (1994) sees projective identification and countertransference as one of the essential aspects of the unconscious in organizations. Moylan

(1994) describes the phenomenon of contagion within the institution, but also with the supervisor on the basis of projective identification. Obholzer & Zagier Roberts (1994) devote themselves to the disruptive team member with the same focus.

Projective identification as a counterpart to human freedom

When phenomena of projective identification are at work, messages are made – but also our freedom to think is restricted (Symington 1995).

Projective identification leads to the fact that we (have to) “react“ to the state evoked in us. In everyday life, projective identification is a common means of exercising power. If we use projective identification to influence or control our fellow human beings, we have no real interest in their inner world and their free decisions, but in our own exercise of power and control over our counterpart.¹⁸

Neville Symington postulates that freedom of the other and freedom with each other are only possible through the renunciation of projective identifications. We would therefore have to actively refrain from trying to “squeeze“ something into the other person, to control the other person or to influence them in our own way.

Instead, according to Symington, it is about trying to find the “centre of the other person“ without evacuating one’s own emotional parts. This will change the way we interact as human beings: instead of reacting to each other, we will be able to respond to our counterparts and their needs.

If projective identification remains active, a succession of reactions results, possibly in the sense of escalation – until one of the “opponents“ gives in (is manipulated) – or a breakdown occurs (possibly of the opponent or also of the entire communication).

If projective identification is dispensed with, it becomes possible to respond freely to the needs of the other person and to the core of his or her being.

¹⁸ It is undisputed that the need to exercise power and control can arise from deep existential fears for example, and in this respect a very powerful individual may well have a contrary inner world.

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