

GESTALT THEORY AND PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION (1996/1997)

Part of an open forum discussion on "Behavior Online" (www.behavior.net) on the concept of projective identification among Philip Brownell (USA), Thomas Fuchs (Germany) and Stuart Stawman (Australia) which took place over a period of 1996 and 1997.

Projective Identification

by Philip Brownell, 11/15/96

Well, here's a different bone upon which to chew:

We use a phenomenological approach in which the way a person perceives his or her experience impacts the significance they attribute to any given component of that experience, especially one's interactions with other people. We say, when one takes his own such construction and attributes that to someone else, that he or she is projecting. So far so good. You are over there on that sofa, and I'm back here in the rocker. No matter how much I say you're scared (because I perceive you to be scared), you tell me I'm all wet, cuz you've never been more relaxed. My experience and my meaning are mine, sealed up inside my person. Yours are yours, way over there on that sofa.

Enter the notion of projective identification in which I somehow take my feelings and implant them in your body, then try to control myself in you. Does this seem possible to anyone else? I can agree that I may think you feel such and such, and act accordingly, but I have a hard time really embracing with any enthusiasm the idea that one person can actually determine the experience of another in this intrusive manner. Furthermore, I believe it has more to do with interpretive theoretical structures such as object relations.

I also think I am in the minority on this one, because projective identification seems so widely accepted. I was wondering if there were any other Gestalt people out there who have views on this subject. If so, could you give a distinctively Gestalt perspective on projective identification?

Phil Brownell

Gestalt theory and Projective Identification

by Thomas Fuchs, 2/26/97

Gerhard Stemberger told me of your discussion about "projective identification". Your thoughts are very stimulating. All this is very interesting for me, because I will hold a lecture "Psychoanalytic concepts in the light of Gestalt theory" at the 10th Scientific Convention of the Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications (GTA) in Vienna, and "projective identification" will serve as an example, how this rather complex phenomenon can be explained in terms of Gestalt theory.

Stuart Stawman mentioned the Object relation theory. To me this theory remains somewhat vague and gives a "historical solution" to a present process. Kernberg (1978), for example, refers to very early identifications (first four month after birth), that are in the present situation re-activated in both, the projecting person and his partner. In a therapeutic relationship the therapist is forced into what Kernberg calls a "empathic regression". In the course of this process the therapist will overtake the projected aggressions and try to dominate the client.

I'm not really satisfied by this explanation, because it does not take into account the dynamics of the present here and now-process. It still appears like a physicalistic simplification (?): aggression is transferred from one person to another like water from one bottle into another.

How can a phenomenon like this be explained in Gestalt-theoretical terms? Kurt KOFFKA (1935) proposed a theory explaining how one person's feelings can be perceived by another person. He differentiates between a geometrical point-to-point representation (this is what happens in the physical world) and a dynamic organization of the psychophysical field and thus the phenomenal world. The phenomenal world contains the "perceived world" with the perceiving person herself, the

other persons and the environment. The perceiving person experiences in his/her phenomenal world a specific pattern of motion in another person that "contains" as Gestalt-qualities certain affective states. That means, like "sad" pictures or "delightful" melodies the affective state is immediately perceivable. There is no need for interpretation or association.

So it is possible that an empathic person (e.g. therapist) experiences in his/her phenomenal world disassociated affective states of another person, although it seems that there is actually nothing to be seen, to be heard, to be felt. The affective state as a Gestalt-quality (although disassociated) is not lost but still located within the phenomenal field of the perceiving person but cannot be connected to the perceived person. Instead, the feelings are transferred to the own person.

In this way the phenomenon "projective identification" can be explained systematically in Gestalt-theoretical terms without referring to "historical solutions". There can nevertheless be the need to explain which biographical events may have contributed to a person's disassociating of parts of her personality. But the Gestalt-theoretical frame seems sufficient to explain the dynamic process underlying a projective identification. The particularity of this defense mechanism seems to be that in empathic situations persons have difficulties in distinguishing aspects of the own self versus aspects of others within the phenomenal world, especially when one person has no access to certain parts of his/her phenomenal field. The psychoanalytic explanations emphasizing early childhood experiences remain hypothetical. We have to be cautious in connecting present pathological phenomena in adult persons with hypothesized early developments. At least some of the theoretical assumptions of FREUD and KLEIN have to be corrected in the light of empirical developmental psychology (e.g. STERN, 1985).

My Summary (so far).

by Stuart Stawman - sjstawman@msn.com, 3/8/97

The process of this thread is a curious one. What are we doing?

- Are we taking a concept from another system, translating it into our own model's language and determining if it is useful to us or not?
- Are we saying that we do not like what some people have meant by the term 'projective identification' but, if we make it mean something else, we are prepared to steal the name?
- Are we starting with phenomenological experience and attempting to describe it in our model's language?
- Or, are we starting with something that Melanie Klein used to describe an inferred process in the first four months of life, dragging it screaming into the here-and-now and standing around it to see what it does? Trying to decide if it even exists?

For my part (or sins), I have been doing, largely, the first. I have been aware of affective states in myself in the presence of clients (and others) and it was extremely interesting to hear of a possible explanation, alternative to countertransference, for some of these incidents.

I think that Thomas Fuchs has given us a clear and useful, long-hand sense of something that could conceivably transpire between individuals. I think Brian O'Neill captured it in short-hand; "the introjection of a projection". I think the idea that coercion can be facilitatively present instead of, or as well as, the 'projection and/or dissociated affective state' remains plausible.

I agree with Thomas Fuchs that Object Relations Theory can be vague and historical-solution-based. Further, it depends heavily on unfalsifiable propositions concerning the reification of organismic processes. Having said that, Stern (1985) has shed doubt on much of their work, as you say. However, the development of Self Psychology and, in particular, Intersubjectivist Theory (Stolorow et al.) does have much of interest to Gestalt, a point that has been made by Breshgold & Zahm (*Gestalt Journal*, Spring 1992), Jacobs (*Gestalt Journal*, Fall 1992) and Yontef (1993), among others.]