

Seeking Mutual Recognition through the Matrix of Projective Transidentification

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The concept of projective identification, first advanced by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein and subsequently expanded by psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, is a fundamental in relational psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Klein foregrounded the defense of projective identification. She helped us see the ways in which we take what is unwanted in the self and map it onto another, in order to create distance within ourselves from what is unwanted by putting it into the 'other' as well as to be in contact with—to identify with—what is cast out. The other then experiences the introject as a part of themselves. Bion took this important understanding further. He highlighted the normative communicative function of projective identification, the everyday way in which we project our light and our shadow onto another in order that the other person, thus ensorcelled, might feel something, might know something directly, of our otherwise isolated experience. Bion highlighted that we are routinely helped to recognize something of our own experience by interacting with a projected form of that experience in the process of casting it out, effectively putting it into another person.

Psychoanalyst James Grotstein (2009), an analysand and student of Bion, takes the concept a step further, in coining the term projective transidentification. Projective transidentification is the mutually influenced, simultaneous process of projective identification and introjection (the complementary process of taking on a projection) that occurs between client/patient and clinician, in a circular, two person, systemic fashion.

Paradoxically, it is through this process of misrecognition that mutual recognition has the possibility of emerging. As the partial eclipsing of another that projective identification engenders is worked through, as the obscuration of introjection is elucidated, there is the possibility of what relational psychoanalytic expert Jessica Benjamin (1997) presents as mutual recognition. Importantly, for Benjamin genuine intersubjectivity can only come about under the prerequisite condition of such mutual recognition.

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The Matrix Revolutions, the third feature film in the Wachowskis' (2003) acclaimed science fiction trilogy about humanity's capacity for love and peace in the information age, offers a compelling visual analogue for the psychotherapeutic process of projective transidentification. *The Matrix Revolutions* continues the battle for Zion—the human city that is being invaded and threatened to be destroyed by the ever-advancing machines and clones. Smith, the sadistic character in the film, tries to kill the Oracle—she who mediates the uncertain future and faith in a possible peace. Neo, the principal protagonist in the film, works in conjunction with the Oracle to defeat Smith and thus protects the conditions for a possible peace in the city of Zion.

What if we allow ourselves to read Smith as a shadow element of Neo as client, and the Oracle as a healing agent of the therapist? As Smith overtakes the Oracle, we can read Smith's attempt at destruction variously as Neo's projection of his sadism into the Oracle and as the Oracle's participatory introjection of Smith as shadow element of Neo. In this light, something quite profound happens next. While the Oracle appears to be overtaken, indeed to be killed (as part of a negative transference), in actuality she is retained in Smith's consciousness in spite of himself. She begins to cut through Neo's projection of Smith from within him, from within the introject she has taken into herself and indeed, on a meaningful level, actually become. Projective transidentification could be said to occur in their near death alchemical exchange. At an epic moment at the apex of the film, just after the Oracle appears in Smith's mind, Smith attempts to kill Neo once and for all. Yet Neo, joining with the fleeting appearance of the Oracle within Smith that heralds Smith's vulnerability to Neo and the Oracle's transformative agency, is ultimately able to destroy Smith from within.

From the perspective of an analogue to psychotherapeutic practice, one could say that the Oracle and Neo are jointly able to metabolize and alchemize Neo's sadistic shadow, Smith, by paradoxically identifying with Smith, thus creating the conditions for mutual recognition between Neo and the Oracle. The Oracle recognizes Neo's capacity to overcome the shadow within him, as Smith. Neo recognizes the Oracle's genuine faith, a faith that carries her beyond any illusion of definitive knowledge of what the future holds. Possible peace exists in this potential space of mutual recognition. There is no certainty of what the future holds for the human city of Zion, only the capacity for peace to be consciously maintained with the defeat of Smith, with the defeat of the machines, as Neo and the Oracle recognize their ability to continue to fight for truth together. In the light of an analogue to psychotherapeutic practice, one could say that genuine faith in the process of relational psychoanalytic psychotherapy rests in the ongoing ability of client and therapist to jointly cut through those complementary shadow elements of projection and introjection, of projective transidentification, in order to see one another, and themselves, for who they truly are.

References

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