

The Truth in the Projection

Projection is a term which is used a great deal in the various forms of group activity, loosely described as 'Growth Groups'. The term is usually used in relation to the verbal element of these groups, but the process is, almost certainly, also operating at emotional and physical levels. It is a piece of jargon which is quickly picked up by group members and is often used in defensive and confusing ways.

This short article will attempt to add more meaning to the term projection and show how this understanding can be used more productively in group situations. I will limit my comments to projections onto other persons, rather than projections onto objects and in dreams and fantasy.

Projection seems to occur when there is an increase in energy triggered off by perceiving one's own attributes or deficiencies in another person. The projection is usually seen in terms of adverse criticism, but can also take the form of positive criticism or praise. The projection is either spoken aloud or thought silently or may be just a feeling which is not understood at a rational level. In extreme cases, there is no truth in the projection, in which case, the statement can be described, technically, as paranoid.

The individual group member has his own personal perception of the other members of the group. Positive and negative feelings are aroused by the mannerisms, postures, beliefs, defensive patterns, expression of feeling and many other aspects of their personalities. Many of these traits are noticed and commented on by all the members of the groups, but it is instructive to observe which members are particularly irritated or pleased by these facets of that individual's personality. So, it would appear, a whole complex series of perceptual interactions are going on, the energy involved depending largely on the personal make-up of the perceiver.

The main point I wish to make, and one which is often ignored, is that there is, usually, a truth in the projection. The critic is seeing something real in the other person, which at a low level of awareness, usually unconsciously, the critic knows to be a part of himself as well.

In the bustle of general encounter, when the focus of the group doesn't rest on any particular individual, a large number of projections appear to be bandied about. However, a point is often reached when a particular statement or criticism really makes a deep impression on the recipient and at this point, statements are often made such as 'that is just a projection' or more strongly 'that is a massive projection'. This is a very effective device on the part of the person receiving the statement to throw the attention of the whole group onto the person who made the statement, often with the collusion of the group leader, because it provides an opportunity for demonstrating a popular piece of jargon in operation.

The accusation of making a projection usually throws the person making the projection into a state of confusion, and this is often seized upon by the group or the group leader as an opportunity to focus on that individual. This is likely to give that group member a valuable opportunity to look at his own behaviour and opens the possibility of self-knowledge. The person who rejected the projection is usually left in a strong position and often takes a cool stance. This is understandable in that, playing this particular group game, he has scored a point. This could, however, be covering up his own defensive accusing stance. The group moves on to other business, and yet he too has revealed an area which could be used for a productive work situation. An obvious way of resolving these conflicting needs is to set up a situation in which both group members can work together, possibly using role reversal, as, in all probability they will be working on aspects of the same problem.

Having one's projections pointed out can be very instructive, but it can also be extremely punishing, particularly if you are left with the feeling that it was all in your head. It is implied that your perception was totally wrong and it is easy for some group members to be totally silenced by accusations of projection, particularly when the truth in the projection is not considered.

The complementary process of not seeing the truth in the projection is often disguised under the heading of 'feedback' where members of the group, in turn, make comments on one individual. Often much of the feedback, although possibly true consists of projections on the part of the person giving the feedback and it is the need to project which determines the unique content and power of the criticisms. If this is pointed out, preferably after the round of feedback, it eases the isolation and punishment of the group member who has been in the 'hot seat' and provides a logical reason for change of focus.

An aspect of projection, again often totally ignored, is that many positive statements are often forms of projection. Statements of liking and praise are usually just taken at face value, because they tend to generate good feelings in the group and there is little motivation to examine the possible defensive elements in this type of comment. An important limitation in the development of social relations is that we tend to seek out people with similar personalities and belief systems as ourselves. Expression of good feelings can easily be a form of projected narcissism. This often develops into a pair of group members indulging in mutual admiration, which will provide a powerful barrier against the group making inroads into their defensive systems.

Another way in which positive projection is used as a defensive process is with individuals who can see nothing positive in themselves, but see other people in excessively glowing terms. In my experience, this often occurs where the individual concerned has excessively strong guilt feelings and couldn't possibly accept the positive aspects of themselves. It could be that this acceptance would remove the excuse for not living a more positive life. This would expose the individual to other anxieties.

It is difficult to make any general statement concerning positive projection, but I feel

that a closer examination of the favourable statements made in groups could bring out an aspect of self learning which is often ignored in groups.

A sensitive understanding of the process of projection is vital for the increased functioning of the group and part of this learning is to be aware of when the term is being used in a defensive, punishing way. For myself, an understanding of my own, and other people's projections, has been the most obvious learning from the verbal element of group experiences. Learning, which I am certain, has carried over into the 'real-life' situation.

In subtle and gross forms, projection appears to pervade all of our social interactions. I do not subscribe to the extreme view that all criticism is projection, but I still find myself continually pushing out and refusing to take responsibility for the parts of myself that I do not like.

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You Value Me and I Value You

One of the fundamental ideas in Humanistic Psychology is that the human being is to be respected and valued. Few people I think would disagree with this on face value but from time to time people do try to evaluate just what it means. John J. Mitchell in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* Vol.15, No.1 asks among other things 'is every person approximately equal in worth and value' and goes on to evaluate the difference between the death of Christ and of Socrates with that of a junky pimp.

Very frequently also we read of the wrongness of making 'value judgements'. The implication here is that this is a mechanical judgement based on a moral schema and the suggestion is that the moral framework may not be valid in the particular circumstances.

I think one of the great troubles is the different meanings in the word value. We have already had three—firstly a general feeling of approval and respect, secondly a measurement which can be used to compare like with like, and thirdly an ethical judgement system.