Projective identification

There is a variety of definitions given in gestalt and beyond for the concept of projective identification. Let me offer a brief but by no means comprehensive cross-section of the diverse views of this process.

The term projective identification was first used by Melanie Klein (1946), a pioneer from the object relations school of psychoanalysis, where it has frequently been described as a ‘primitive defence mechanism’ – meaning that the process originated early in child development.

Some of the descriptions of the process offered by a selection of gestalt writers are as follows:

- Philippson says that, ‘the therapist will find herself experiencing emotions which are being suppressed by the client’ (2001: 80) and further describes projective identification as, ‘the therapist picking up feelings that originate in the client’ (ibid: 116).
- Joyce and Sills (2001) discuss the concept as ‘carrying’ a dis-owned feeling for the client and direct the reader towards the object relationalist Ogden (1982) who in turn describes the process as, ‘a concept that addresses the way in which feeling states corresponding to the unconscious fantasies of one person (the projector) are engendered in and processed by another person (the recipient), that is, the way in which one person makes use of another person to experience and contain an aspect of himself.’
- MacKewn (1997: 95) describes the process, ‘whereby a client unawaresly conveys his/her feelings by “giving” the therapist an experience of how he/she feels, rather than by articulating’. She goes on to clarify that the therapist does not actually feel the client’s feelings but that similar feelings are evoked.
- Staaemmler (1993) shared his thoughts in his comprehensive paper by discussing projective identification in terms of an interaction pattern and the process as the basis of the therapeutic process.
- Yontef (1993) describes this as the person alienating a feeling from himself or herself and then attributing it to the other. Thus, he describes the person who does not own his or her feelings onto the other.

In my years as a gestalt trainer, I found that all the concepts and techniques of gestalt therapy are based on the idea of projective identification. I believe that all these concepts are perfectly fine for the modality for which they were created. However, in my opinion, one must adequately describe and transference. The use of relational dynamic whereas can lead to the belief that the therapist (it is invariably so) is simply not aware that gestalt theory can lead to the belief that the therapist (it is invariably so) is simply not aware that gestalt therapy is not a theory of psychoanalytic concepts. I consider how these concepts of gestalt.

Perhaps the recent discoveries which show something of the relatiional states, throw a different light on the concept of projective identification in that the concept is becoming increasingly evocative.

I recall a workshop I attended as a therapist and trainer at a recent well-known and respected 58
interaction pattern’ and saw the ‘communicative function’ of the process as the basis of its therapeutic potential.

- Yontef (1993) describes the process of projective identification as the person alienating or disowning an aspect of themselves, attributing it to the other person and then instead of moving away from that person identifying with them. A bright person who does not own her intelligence may project that quality onto the other.

In my years as a gestalt trainer and supervisor, I have no doubt that of all the concepts and processes people have struggled to comprehend in grappling with psychotherapy and gestalt theory it is the concept of projective identification that has caused the most confusion. Perusing the small sample of definitions above perhaps we can see why. Whilst I am sure that Ogden’s thinking is fine for the modality for which it was intended, to my mind this particular piece of psychoanalytic thinking does not transport into gestalt. It fails to acknowledge the co-created nature of experience, is not phenomenological or field theoretical. Other definitions do to a greater or lesser extent acknowledge these areas. However, I believe that the processes discussed could be just as adequately described in terms of counter-transference or co-transference. The use of these terms better illuminates a relational dynamic whereas describing projective identification can lead to the belief that the client simply puts a feeling into the therapist (it is invariably spoken of this way round). There is no doubt that gestalt theory has been enriched by the importation of psychoanalytic concepts, but we do need to carefully consider how these concepts rest with the fundamental principles of gestalt.

Perhaps the recent discoveries of mirror neurons (Schore, 2003) which show something of how we understand one another’s mental states, throw a different light on such processes as projective identification in that the co-created nature of such a phenomenon is becoming increasingly evident.

I recall a workshop I attended run by a renowned gestalt therapist and trainer at a recent conference. A participant, himself a well-known and respected trainer, questioned the workshop leader about a particular process and described it as projective
identification. The leader’s response was swift, ‘I suggest you find another way of conceptualizing that,’ she replied. Knowing the participant I don’t think that he had any intention of conceptualizing his views on projective identification any differently. In microcosm in that interaction I witnessed the diversity of views within gestalt that enriches the approach, leads to lively debate but which also confuses its students.

Energy, interests, needs

My wife and I took our flossed teeth and walked around excitedly. The meerkat was delighted by our grand entrance, and we walked around at a more leisurely pace while he played with them interestingly, we had both.

We see energy, interest and the brightness of a person’s nature of their movements, the quality of contact with and vitality. One stimulates novel. When energized we need to meet our environment to make our life situation we are able to upon our environment (see Points 10 and 14). Our needs and to follow through the aggressive completion of unfinished business through (see Points 13 and 14). Absent, or perceived as be that creates excitement i anxiety or depression in a well-supported person it is a lifespacem in the under-supp

When a person feels their familiarity boundary, through themselves in relation to their environment support, even minor challenge is avoided. Self-belief can be in shades of grey leading to vibrancy. Energy might appear inwards or invested in n