Introduction

The hardest battle is to be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else.

(e. e. cummings, 1994)

The process of introjection can be described in simple terms as swallowing whole messages from the environment and emerged from Perls’ interest in the development of dental aggression. When the infant cuts teeth choice increases as chewing over what enters the body becomes possible. However, the environment needs to be supportive of this increased ability to differentiate, if force-fed by carers this selection process can be inhibited and the infant may learn to take in whatever is offered without discrimination. Such a process is not limited to physical nourishment, the degree to which we ‘chew over’ information or messages we receive will reflect in how we are in the world.

In introjection the person takes on board without question an attitude, trait or way of being from the environment resulting in the building of an internalized rulebook of shoulds, oughts and similar absolutes. Such messages are all around us: in our upbringing, our schooling, our religion and our culture. They are in the air we breathe and the ground upon which we walk. They may have been born from actual statements, e.g. ‘Big boys don’t cry’, ‘Don’t be angry’, made by people we can identify or through a process akin to osmosis. The person responding to introjected material, usually out of awareness, will feel a strong pressure to conform to these internalized rules and is likely to feel uncomfortable if they go against them. In our work let us not forget that this process will have originally been a developmental manoeuvre to ensure safety or acceptance and was the best way of creatively adjusting to the environment at the time. As such the client’s creative genius stands before us, an energy that may be directed restrictively but an energy that displays the creative potential of the individual.

Experiential exercise

Think back to your part of your daily body, honesty, mo early instructions y as an adult or are t

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Case example

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It is neither negative nor positive to introject per se. Introjection is part of a learning process, we may need to reconsider what we have learnt, but first we need to take on board that learning, and that may mean initially swallowing whole before assimilating later. When first learning to look both ways before crossing a road it doesn’t really matter whether one introjects that message or not! Introjects allow us to internalize significant societal rules and to function within different societal systems.

**Experiential exercise**

_Think back to your childhood. What messages or instructions were part of your daily life? What messages did you receive about your body, honesty, morality, sex? Now reflect on how many of these early instructions you still follow. Have you freely chosen all of them as an adult or are there some you just live by without question?_

The process of introjection often occurs out of awareness in response to stereotyping. The advertising industry can be seen as a ‘good’ example of this – men should be strong, women should be passive, men should drink beer, women should wear make-up, men and women should be a perfect shape. I can also assure you that you really do need the latest gadget!

Many problems are rooted in a belief a person has about how they need to be in the world that has never been questioned. The person then continues to live their life by this prescribed way of being that has now become self-prescribed and can be re-prescribed for the next generation. An introject can support a whole system of moderations or, conversely, a whole system of moderations can be constructed to protect an introjected belief. People who habitually introject lack a sense of self and consequently are often on the lookout as to how they should be and what they ought to be doing. Below I have given an example of how a system of introjected beliefs can support each other.

**Case example**

Susan habitually attempted to look after me in sessions and would repeatedly check out if I was alright when she had contacted an emotion. She adapted to how she imagined I might want her to be.
We uncovered that her behaviour had formed in response to an archaic introject; ‘Don’t be who you are, be who I need you to be’. This belief was supported by another powerful introject carried from early childhood that led her to believing that she was unloveable. She had been an unwanted pregnancy and unwanted as a child, her mother had told her that she had wanted a termination. Susan therefore believed that she needed to adapt in order to gain a degree of love and acceptance. In order to live in accordance with these beliefs, Susan made the creative adjustment of splitting off parts of herself resulting in her disowning these parts. Consequently, she had never been loved for all she truly was. Through challenging her secondary introjects such as ‘don’t be angry’ and ‘don’t cause trouble’ she discovered that questioning was allowed and that change was possible.

If we return to the early influences on gestalt, one discovery that ties in well with introjection is that made by Freud that we humans fail to take in information or events that challenge our core beliefs. We are capable of a creative selective capacity regarding what information we assimilate and what we distort, forget or reject in relation to these core beliefs. Challenge these beliefs prematurely, before a solid relational ground has been built, and they are likely to be defended forcefully.

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4 I believe that the term ‘ground introject’ as defined by McConville (1997) is more compatible with gestalt theory than ‘core belief’.