

**Projective Identification in  
Organizational Consultation**

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July 31, 1990

## INTRODUCTION

Consultants are faced with the need to frame problems and design interventions on the basis of extremely limited data about their client systems.<sup>1</sup> Information is distorted and change efforts are often undermined by implicit and unrecognized forces that emerge in the course of an intervention. Rice (1963) illustrates this point:

What appears on the surface as a simple organizational problem may often be found to have underlying it deep-seated and largely unrecognized emotional conflicts....A solution to the overt problem may not provide relief; indeed it may exacerbate the underlying difficulties by removing a symptom, attention to which has provided a defence against the anxiety of having to face the real causes. In the extreme, a client may well wish to keep the overt problem alive and unsolved as a means of containing the anxiety inherent in its solution. (p. 274)

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<sup>1</sup>The discussion here is concerned with both social and technical consultation. The distinction between technical and social consultation is far from clear because they both require human collaboration. Designing and implementing even the most technical of interventions depends on the receptivity of the client system, an effective implicit theory of the social system, and an appropriate problem formulation. Often, the acceptance of a "technical" frame in the presenting problem is itself a form of collusion between client and consultant to steer away from more difficult, anxiety-laden aspects of a problematic situation.

The misunderstandings that arise out of these forces can surface in all phases of an intervention, starting with the way in which a client's presenting problem shapes the initial formulation. No amount of sophistication in the execution of an intervention can overcome an error in problem definition, what Mitroff and Featheringham (1974) call Type III error. And throughout the initiative the interventionist's understanding, and thus his or her ability to act purposefully, is subject to distortion by unrecognized and important aspects of the client system.

Yet, how is one to ascertain these latent, often hidden features? Interventionists have developed a variety of technologies to help inquire systematically into the settings they are attempting to alter. Self-report methods and survey instruments have proven useful for getting access to certain types of data. However, they are limited in terms of revealing those dimensions of organizational life that are outside of the awareness of the informants (Nisbet & Wilson, 1977; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977). And these forces are often the most formidable barriers to successful projects.

To understand these dynamics, consultants must use more interpretative methods, trying to piece together pattern data that yield a deeper understanding of the organization's culture and critical latent features (Weiss, 1968). Such pattern data can be found in a variety of ways as one listens with the "third ear" to the client system.

This paper contributes to the methodology of discovering these implicit, out-of-awareness dynamics influencing organizational consultation. Specifically, we argue here that the roles assigned to the consultant or the intragroup dynamics induced in the consulting team

recreate important and unconscious dynamics of the client system. Properly understood, this recreation process provides invaluable data for understanding critical aspects of the client system and therefore can potentially enhance the interventionist's ability to work effectively.

We first identify a theoretical construct developed in the object-relations school of psychoanalytic thinking that appears to explain the phenomena we are concerned with, and then review a variety of ways in which this process has been observed. Three cases illustrate these processes. First is an example of how an individual consultant can be inducted into a certain relational system which, when understood clearly, provided the clue to designing a more effective intervention. The second is an example of how dynamics in the client system unconsciously shaped the working relationship between two consultants and their relationship to the client, and how the resulting team dynamics were used to understand the client system's developmental needs more deeply. The last examines ways in which projective identification affected a consulting team engaged with a large information services company. Finally, we discuss the implications of this formulation for the organization of consultancies and the way it can usefully inform the interventionist's approach.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The theoretical foundation for understanding implicit, out-of-awareness communication has evolved out of the object-relations school of psychoanalysis. In particular, it rests on a process known as projective identification, first described by Melanie Klein (1975a) in her clinical investigations. The process involves *simultaneously* a type of psychological defense against

unwanted feelings or fantasies, a mode of communication, and a type of human relationship (Ogden, 1982).

The unconscious transfer of information occurring via projective identification is primarily a two-phase process. It begins with the denial and ejection of feelings that are inherent in a person's unconscious image (fantasy) of a situation. The person therefore alters his uncomfortable experience by imagining that part of it is an attribute of someone or something else, rather than of himself.

In the second phase of projective identification, the recipient of the attribution or projection is essentially inducted into the originator's scheme of things. He or she is subtly pressured into thinking, feeling, and behaving in a manner congruent with the feelings or thoughts evacuated by the other.

Thus, while projective identification is a type of defense in the sense of unconsciously serving to insulate the projector from an aspect of his or her experience, it is a mode of communication in the sense that the feelings which are congruent with one's own inner image are induced in another, creating a sense of "being understood by or at one with the other" (Ogden, 1982).

The impact of projective identification on the therapist-patient interaction is profound and has been studied extensively by researchers exploring how a wide range of countertransference feelings and responses stem from the relationship itself rather than strictly from therapist's own background. Through the mechanism of projective identification, the patient can actually induce the therapist to experience in him or herself that denied aspect.

As Bion (1961) describes it, the therapist is inducted into the patient's inner image of the world: "the analyst feels he is being manipulated so as to be playing a part, no matter how

difficult to recognize, in someone else's fantasy" (p. 149). This ongoing link between internal intrapsychic process and the interpersonal dimension has provided the foundation for understanding important aspects of group and organizational life. Bion's (1961) pioneering studies of groups examined how a type of collusive, shared group mentality evolves through the collective use of projective identification. Jacques (1955) and Menzies (1970) used this framework for understanding how adults in group and institutional settings use projective identification to cope with complex feelings that arise in the course of ordinary social relations.

Projective identification enables us to understand a wide range of group and institutional phenomena. As various group members, subgroups, or organizational sectors come to symbolize or represent some unwanted aspect, they can serve as repositories for certain projected-out elements and are then induced to enact these feelings or fantasies. The often observed patterns of role differentiation (Gibbard, Hartman and Mann, 1974; Wells, 1990), role suction (Redl, 1963; Horwitz, 1983), in which groups pressure a member into a needed role, and scapegoating (Jacques, 1955; Gibbard, Hartman, and Mann, 1974; Dunphy, 1978), are comprehensible in terms of projective identification.

How the recipient of this process responds has crucial impact on the experience of the sender. If the recipient simply enacts the role he or she is assigned, then a tacit, collusive agreement is established in which the original meaning of the unwanted feelings or fantasies is reinforced and the defense against thinking about them confirmed.

Thus, the recipient (or possibly scapegoat) takes on, or even accentuates, the characteristics attributed to him or her and thereby confirms the repugnance the others feel for that (disowned) aspect of themselves. Perhaps a member embodies the role assigned by the

group, such as the rebellion leader. Or, possibly, the therapist unconsciously becomes the sadistic parent in the patient's inner world by attempting one punishing interpretation after another.

If, on the other hand, the recipient can gain mastery over the process through understanding it, the process can be usefully transformed into thought and symbolization (Segal, 1981; Ogden, 1982). In other words, meaning can be made of it. The psychotherapy literature devotes much discussion to the best ways to "contain" and transform the process into a useful experience for the patient. (Ogden, 1982; Malin & Grotstein, 1986; Searles, 1963). Without doing so, the therapist loses rich data concerning the patient's internal world. The ability to capture and use these data is what we want to consider in an organizational context.

Projective identification, while it can produce dramatic events, is an important part of ordinary social relations as well. It has been related, for example, to the capacity for empathy (Klein, 1975b). Projecting parts of the self into others and then identifying with them enables the person to feel understood by the other (Wells, 1990; Ogden, 1982; Winnicott, 1965). This sense of feeling understood is an important part of any helping alliance, whether it be in a therapeutic context or other confidante-type relationship, such as organizational consulting.

How projective identification works in the consulting relationship is little understood or studied by consultants. Two assumptions are necessary in order to gain understanding by mapping this concept onto the client-consultant relationship. One is that the same ongoing projective process that shapes the organizational social field also produces the organization's inability to address the problems or challenges for which it calls in an outside consultant. One typical instance of this is the defensive maneuver by which a manager denies his or her own responsibility for the situation and

projects it onto others. Another instance is how mutually maintained splitting and projective identification produce mistrust, suspicion, and adversarial relations between subgroups, labor and management, for example, and concomitantly a diminished ability to collaborate toward mutually acceptable solutions.

The same projective process that shapes the social field is inherent in the client's tacit understanding of, or relatedness to, the setting. Relatedness here refers to the client's image or picture-in-the-mind of the situation (Senge, 1990; Lawrence, 1979; Money-Kyrle, 1961) rather than to the situation itself. On the group level it refers to the shared understanding of the problematic situation.

The second assumption is that by engaging with the organization, the consultant or action research team enters the same social field, with all its distortions and shared constructs. In working with a consultant to clarify and understand a challenging or problematic situation, the client conveys his picture of the situation to the consultant, including those aspects of the problem which the client is denying to himself (Bain, 1981). Thus the same projective process which is shaping the client system will shape the interventionist's experience of the organization.

Given these two assumptions, we can see that of the myriad ways in which consultants come to understand the situation, both explicit and tacit, the projective process in the consultant-client relationship provides a key insight. It is a channel of communication that contains otherwise unconscious information - thus data about the situation unavailable via more ordinary means of inquiry.

Several action researchers have observed and written about projective identification in



their work. Bain (1981) suggests that the "denied aspect of the presenting problem, i.e., the personal link that connects presenter and problem, is at first projected into the role that is desired for the consultant." His analysis is concerned with the presenting problem, and the need for the consultant to examine the latent meaning of the presenting problem by understanding the role assigned to the consultant as a critical window into the client's unconscious understanding of the problem. How the consultant is made to feel about the problem and what the consultant is made to feel wanted for are his data for this analysis.

Other researchers have noticed that the dynamics of the research and consulting teams tend to reflect those of the host organization, without explicitly discussing the dynamic mechanism of projective identification. A group of researchers (see Alderfer, 1977; Smith, 1984) has developed the concept of parallel processes, which refers to any apparent resonances between two engaged social systems. This concept is more general than projective identification because it includes a wide variety of conscious and unconscious mechanisms. Nonetheless, they often appear to be discussing the same phenomena we elucidate here.

Still other researchers hover around the concept or describe it without using technical psychoanalytic terms. Smith (1984) mentions how "covert dynamics in one system can get played out, in parallel form by another system with which it interacts." Steele (1975) suggests that the emotional process of the client group can be observed by looking at the ways in which the consulting team's interactions have changed. In describing attempts to bring about labor-management cooperation systems, Walsh (1983) notes how readily client systems induce internal strife in consulting teams, labeling the dynamic "consultant splitting." Most recently, Hirschhorn (1988) provides several illuminating case descriptions of the impact of projective

identification on the consultant.

Now let us turn to three examples of how projective identification has influenced our own work with client systems and in particular how in client engagements it has offered potentially invaluable data for providing effective intervention.

## **CASE ILLUSTRATIONS**

This section illustrates the operation of projective identification in consulting experiences of the authors. We begin with the process as it unfolded with a single consultant, then with two consultants, and finally with a team of three. In the first, the awareness on the consulting side of the relationship came, unfortunately, predominately after the completion of the consulting assignment. As a result, valuable information about the client organization, about which they themselves were unaware, was not brought into the work. In the second and third, the teams became aware of this process during the consultation and used the knowledge as the basis for the ongoing work with the organization.

### ***Case A: Strategic Planning Workshop***

The Deputy Director of a major city department requested the assistance of the a consultant at a senior staff retreat. The aims were to set goals and review key tasks in each of the major divisions. The participants were the Commissioner, the Deputy, and the three division heads. At the initial interview, the Deputy expressed considerable anxiety about the Commissioner's

volatility and his "personality or style" in dealing with the rest of the team. However, the Deputy asked the consultant to stay away from these issues and to keep the group focused on goals and tasks.

The consultant began the work by developing a questionnaire on goals, tasks and team relationships that each participant would complete prior to the session. While preparing the document he began to feel increasingly anxious and caught in the middle between the Commissioner and the others. During interviews with the Commissioner, the consultant felt the Commissioner was confiding his thoughts about the others that he had not yet communicated directly to them. When with the others, the consultant was filled with their concerns about whether or not the Commissioner would "blow up" if they were honest about the issues. A meeting of all parties was set prior to the retreat, but "inadvertently" the Commissioner had not been notified, and was not in attendance. The consultant, as a result, met with the Commissioner several hours later, serving again as a go-between on the especially hot issues of how working relationships might be addressed during the retreat.

At the session itself, the Commissioner failed to begin the meeting as he had agreed he would, instead rambling on about matters irrelevant to the task at hand. The time was slipping away and participants began to signal the consultant to control the Commissioner and get him to start the session. As the consultant's anxiety mounted, he eventually signalled the Commissioner to begin.

Let us now examine this case drawing on the framework that we have presented earlier. The Deputy was presenting a technical problem of facilitating a strategic planning workshop. The "denied aspect of the presenting problem" (Bain, 1981) was put into the consultant: the

overfunctioning of this Deputy in managing the relationships of the directors with the Commissioner and the avoidance of the difficult relationship issues. Note that the Deputy was not unaware of the Commissioner's volatility and the interpersonal problems. What was projected were his links to those issues, his own contribution to the repetitive patterns. The consultant then acted out the projections by playing the go-between role and by managing the Commissioner's behavior at the workshop. The consultant began to feel responsible, and overfunction with regard to these relationships issues as the second step in the process of projective identification. By enacting the projection rather than understanding it, the consultant lost an opportunity to intervene constructively on the real problems facing the group.

The session produced goal statements and lists of tasks, but left in place the dysfunctional relationships that were the real problem. Without better working alliances, the follow-through on the workshop was predictably poor. Rice (in Bain, 1981, p. 645) describes the danger for the specialist in "human relations" of aspiring to "a technocratic role, so that not only is his continued employment as a technician justified, but also so that technocracy itself may serve as a defense against some of the difficulties involved in any real attempt to resolve the problems for the solution of which he has ostensibly been introduced."

One of the dangers of working alone in complex emotional systems is heightened difficulty in seeing when the above processes are operative. In this case, after the fact, the consultant was able to see the major patterns and did get help from a colleague in understanding the feelings that were being projected into him and their relationship to the central issues the work group faced.

## **Case B: Juvenile Justice Agency**

In this case a pair of consultants participated in an ongoing change effort with a large juvenile justice agency. The aim of the consultancy was to assist a recently appointed Commissioner in formulating new directions for the organization, in developing a strategy for implementation, and in building the necessary working relationships and competencies into the organization. The agency consisted of three major divisions: a secure detention center, an aftercare program, and nonsecure network of group homes. Each had historically functioned in relative isolation from one another. A major initiative of the new leader was to better link the divisions around a shared mission that integrated both childcare functions and security concerns. Furthermore, she began to develop a case management system that would both increase accountability for services and focus staff on each child.

Within the context of this case, we will explore how the dyad's dynamics mirrored those in the system, and provided us with useful information about the client system. Once we were able to understand this correspondence we were able to guide our interventions favorably.

The consulting dyad worked originally with the senior staff on agency-wide strategic planning issues. As the scope of work began to include more implementation issues, the major operating units were offered consulting resources for their work as well. The deployment of the consultants had the team leader, Tom, working predominately with the Commissioner and headquarters staff. The other, Jim, was assigned to work with key operating units, most notably the secure detention function. This deployment allowed for particular identification of different consultants with different units and levels of the organization.

One of the central issues early in the work was the relationship of the Commissioner with the

Director of the secure detention facility (called "Elmwood" here). While the relationships between a Commissioner and his or her wardens is key in all correctional organizations, this one was particularly sensitive because the facility accounted for almost 75% of the agency's budget. Furthermore, they were interdependent in two important senses. First, the administration's political vulnerability and its reputation to the outside world rested largely on what happened (or did not happen) at Elmwood. Second, the extensive changes that this Commissioner undertook had to be accomplished, to a large degree, in that setting.

Thus, the relationship was already charged and, by the time of our arrival, had been turbulent. One of the major issues between the Commissioner and her Elmwood Director was that the Director's planning work was underdeveloped. The Commissioner framed the problem as follows:

For us, to learn how better to help her; for her, to learn how to use us so that her work gets better so that it's more likely to fly - so that she does not have to do it four times. . . we picked unit reorganization because (the detention Director) wanted to do it, but it's taken us six weeks to get the necessary materials and we've lost the interesting aspects of the conversation, decentralization, etc. in the process.

The extensive development effort required considerable written work and documentation especially to sell the unit reorganization to central control agencies outside of the department. Somehow the Commissioner felt unable to get the level and quality of work he needed to accomplish the tasks on her own level; he was disappointed and discouraged with the situation and felt herself to be deskilled.

The idea of unit reorganization had emerged from the Director of Elmwood as part of her

agenda in getting control over the facility. During the agency wide planning sessions it had been conceptually linked to the case management agenda. The unit reorganization would decentralize authority to the units and make them more accountable for the total experience of the youth in detention.

Our consulting pair became involved in this initiative at a meeting of the Commissioner and two other key members of headquarters staff with the Director of Elmwood and two of her staff members. The Commissioner was chairing the meeting, flanked by his two deputies. At the other end of the table sat the Director and her assistants. The two consultants on either side of the table were in the middle. The meeting was a difficult one. The Commissioner began by listing questions that had to be thought through, and the institutional staff began to present data. It became quickly clear that the different parties to the meeting had different expectations of the session. The information was confused and not in a format that could test out some of the alternatives on the table. The institutional staff appeared confused as to whether they were expected to develop a desired unit reorganization or simply fashion a feasible plan within the many existing constraints of budget and personnel categories. By the close of the meeting, it was agreed that the institutional staff would take the key questions back and develop a specific proposal. The consultants were offered and accepted as a resource for this work as knowledgeable about organizational design issues. Thus, we received our assignment within an initial framing of the problem as a technical organizational issue. As discussed in the following section, this framing was crucially shaped by the patterns of projection within the agency that we had accepted in ways we only came to understand as we engaged around the redesign effort.

We joined with the detention facility executive team in a day-long planning session to assist in the development of the unit design. The lead consultant was Jim, the team member assigned to work with Elmwood; Tom, though director of the overall team, was in a support role on this assignment. The day went quite well with a creative design emerging from the discussions.

Upon leaving, the consultants agreed to write a summary note on the day describing the design ideas and their organizational implications, with Jim taking responsibility for producing the note. Two days later, Tom became anxious about the note and sent Jim a draft document he wrote himself, leaving several sections blank for pieces Jim was still to write, but substantially developing the document and its organization. Jim became resentful and pointedly reminded Tom of the original delegation to him of the work with Elmwood in general and this task in particular. He asked for his delegation to be reconfirmed; he would take the notes as input but would develop the document in the way he felt was best, which he did.

A day later, reflecting over this awkward exchange, the two consultants began to see how they had been enacting an important dynamic within the client system. Tom, the director of the team and who was most closely aligned with the Commissioner, felt he was being given an unpalatable choice - to delegate completely (perhaps to the point of abdication) or to do the job himself. There did not appear to be a middle collaborative ground, especially with Jim (the subordinate consultant aligned most closely with the Director) in the lead role and Tom acting as a resource.

The resonance of this with the picture conveyed to us in our work with the Commissioner



helped us make sense of our experiences. Inside the organization, the Director of detention felt that the authority to do her assignment in the way she felt best was undercut by the "impatient" participation of the Commissioner. The Commissioner was sending mixed signals about the responsibility for the reorganization of Elmwood. She respected the competence and leadership of the institution, but needed to be involved in the design of this change. Yet, the either/or style of collaboration evolving on that boundary made his participation impossible without it seeming like a "vote of no confidence."

This enactment of the client system dynamic within the consulting pair and our ability to recognize that this was not simply an issue in our own work relationship (our ability to recognize it was partly because it seemed so out of character to us) helped us understand a major issue. From initially accepting this assignment as a technical design issue, we had come to understand, via our containing and interpreting the projections into the consulting dyad, that the issue really concerned difficulties of collaboration across a hierarchical boundary.

Making sense of projected data involves avoiding the enactment of the pattern and transforming it into thought that can be used in the subsequent work. For example, though we agreed to write up notes of the meeting as consultants to the Director of Elmwood, they were not in a form that she could not submit as a ghost-written report. This would have been colluding with the unconscious purpose of our being deployed by the Commissioner to "fix" the problem of poor staffing and planning work from the facility. Second, we presented our understandings (based on this and other

pattern data) at a meeting with the Commissioner and her top staff.

We maintain that these points could not have been diagnosed by questionnaires or other additional means because neither the Commissioner nor the Director of detention was conscious of how their struggle over authority on shared projects affected the other. While both were concerned about difficulties in the relationship they were unaware of how the framing of issues as technical (i.e. organizational design) was a defensive avoidance of confronting disturbing social system issues. In deed, our experience of working with Elmwood staff was that they were far more technically competent when thinking among themselves than when working across the boundary, where they became deskilled by the dynamics of the mutual projections.

In this instance, we were able to present our thinking effectively to the clients and support their work on this issue. However, these data do not always have to be interpreted and presented back to the client. Often it can have its major impact in simply shaping the decisions the consultants make on their side of the boundary regarding deployment of their resources, such as reshaping the focus of the consultant's diagnostic inquiry, leading them to reframe intervention efforts, or simply alter tactics to avoid being inducted unconsciously into unhelpful roles.

Another episode involving the same clients illuminates a somewhat more substantive difficulty that interfered with the sophisticated collaborative work needed to undertake the change efforts. One ongoing tension between the Elmwood managers and the headquarter executives was over the degree to which issues of safety and security had to be attended to before major changes in the service areas could be undertaken. The struggles over this issue

appeared to be quite manifest as discussion of the problems involved were held in a number of arenas. On the surface, there was a basic agreement that key safety and security issues warranted priority attention.

Yet, the conversations between Tom and Jim on this issue left an unsatisfying feeling, particularly for Jim. Upon examination, Jim did not feel his position was understood, though both Jim and Tom had been acting as though a shared understanding had evidently been reached.

As part of the work in making sense of this type of data, Jim wrote a memorandum to Tom:

One is the question of just how different are the HQ versus Elmwood priorities regarding safety issues? You thought the differences were exaggerated and I think differently. Obviously we have absorbed something from the system here, and it is something that I think is interfering with collaboration.

On the hypothesis that this too reflected an out-of-awareness systemic dynamic, we investigated and discovered that a similar dynamic was influencing work on the Elmwood-headquarters boundary.

These episodes, and several others reflecting different issues, such as the degree of commitment to budgetary decentralization to support the unit reorganization, revealed a pattern of difficulty in the field-central office working alliance. In a working note to the Commissioner, we presented the issue of headquarters-field relationships as a central problem. Upon reflection, the difference between the two consultants here mirrored a rich set of institutional tensions. Underlying and amplifying the interpersonal struggles over delegation, accountability, and dependency were historic intergroup and institutional tensions grounded in sociocultural and socioeconomic factors. Headquarters was traditionally "white," middle-class and highly educated, while Elmwood was "black" and was composed of staff who were less educated and identified with the children served in a different way. Just as the relationship between the Commissioner

and his Director served as a microcosm for these institutional and cultural tensions, so the relationship between Jim and Tom became a "container" for the anxiety-laden, disturbing aspects of these deeper issues to the extent that they shaped the interpersonal collaboration between the Commissioner and his Director.

We offered as evidence our experience both in transactions with the client and within our own team as we had come to represent the different parts of the organization. While we did not develop our position on the basis of these experiences alone, they were instrumental in our ability to guide our own inquiry into the organization and to shape our understanding of the subtle specifics and local complexities of the very generic issues often confronting such institutions.

Other issues came to light through examination of our own internal team dynamics as well. Though many have proved less helpful in our work with the client system, our insights into these issues have been very useful to our team's capacity to collaborate well together. As Steele (1977) suggests, anxiety-laden aspects of the client organization appear in the form of regressed consulting team dynamics. Working to understand how this is occurring can free the consulting team from maintaining the rigid, constricted roles that emerge under conditions of projective identification and thereby enhance its own collaborative capabilities, enabling it to work more effectively with a client system.

### ***Case C: An Information Services Company***

A large information services company engaged consultants to help it implement a newly forged strategic plan, which reorganized the firm from a traditional functional orientation to a

product line approach. Implementing the plan would require extensive structural and cultural development. The team consisted of three consultants. The lead consultant established a link with the primary client within the system, the COO, who had recently been hired with this strategic development in mind. A second senior consultant worked initially with the CEO. The team's junior consultant was assigned to work with the director of the major product line that accounted for almost half the revenue. This director had also competed for the COO's position.

As the consultation unfolded, the senior executive group was enthusiastically engaged with the development work. The consultants, particularly the lead consultant, were regarded with great respect. Their work was at times idealized, as if it was the magical solution to implementing this strategic plan.

At the same time a rift emerged within the consulting team between the two senior consultants and the more junior member (Bill) who was aligned with the product line director. Increasingly, Bill felt himself extruded from team conversations, disregarded, and that the others devalued his work. They, on the other hand, became increasingly critical of his work and felt that it was not integrated into the overall development effort. The "fault line" around which this conflict emerged concerned how to integrate business planning on the operational level substantively with the strategic planning at the executive levels.

As the conflict crystallized, the junior consultant came to feel that the others had an unexpressed contempt and disregard for the "nitty gritty" of operations. The senior consultants, in turn, felt that Bill was unintentionally colluding with the director by getting overly involved in the psychosocial issues of the unit while avoiding the complex structural and operational questions involved in implementing the strategic plan at the division level. Each member of the

consulting team had the sense of being caught in a perplexing unconscious dynamic that was making it difficult to work together, and particularly difficult to vitalize the executive-operational boundary.

In reviewing the conflict two interesting hypotheses emerge. One is that the team was enacting the unexpressed, tacit doubts about the strategic plan as a tool for guiding operations. In other words, to some degree, for the executive level the plan was serving as a socially maintained defense to foster the notion of coherence, purposefulness, and controlled direction for this very complex, fragmented system. The consulting team's difficulty in integrating the operational planning and development with the strategic plan reflected the system's unaddressed failure, to that point, to create the linkages between levels to make the strategic plan a true guide for operations. The defensive idealization of the lead consultant, similarly, reflected the splitting process that underlay the fantasies about the strategic plan.

A second, correlated parallel process, concerned the relationship between the newly hired COO and the director. The director, who had not been chosen for the COO's post, was quite skeptical of the plan's performance markers and many of the assumptions upon which the overall plan was based. In deploying Bill to work with the director, the team was also unconsciously enacting the COO's wish to get the director "on board" with the use of consultation. The director's resistance to using his consultant predictably mirrored his resistance to accepting his new boss and to joining with the new boss's vision. The atypically critical and punitive dynamic that emerged at times in the consulting team enacted the COO's frustration with his own transition and his anger with the director of his major product line.

## IMPLICATIONS

The implications of attending to issues of projective identification extend throughout a consultation from the first encounter with a client through the termination of the relationship. The consultative relationship brings a consultant into contact with many dimensions and levels of a client system. Often, effective work requires attending to the deeper processes and levels, and their impact on the more manifest problems consultants are generally asked to address.

The turbulent conditions with which organizations must now contend increasingly put strategic questions into the forefront (Kanter, 1989). The need for active, ongoing adaptation to changing circumstances pressures organizations to innovate and realign themselves frequently. Dealing with issues on this level inevitably requires change efforts to grapple with deeper dimensions of organizational life, and confronts consultants with perplexing, often seemingly irrational, behavior that accompanies such change efforts. Consequently, consultants will increasingly need the conceptual machinery to address the underlying, unconscious dimensions of the consulting relationship.

The impact of projections from the client system and consultants' vulnerability to being induced into clients' unconscious patterns are infrequently discussed in the consulting literature and when they are, they are often written about as "pathologies" (Steele, 1975, p. 117) rather than as rich sources of information about the unconscious dimensions of the client's organization. They are important for a single consultant but become particularly complex and rich when a team of consultants is involved.

Consultants are often called in because of distortions in the social field that render the client organization unable to investigate freely and address effectively its own difficulties. The

projective processes at the root of these distortions stem from anxieties inherent in difficult or threatening situations. Frequently, maintaining these distortions involves the avoidance of responsibility by individuals, groups, or organizations and the projection of responsibility for failure into others.

In the quite-understandable wish to join successfully with the client organization, the consultant tries to be helpful and sympathetic. In doing so uncritically, he or she runs the very grave risk of colluding with the distorted image of the situation that the client conveys. The pull to identify with the client is strong, especially early on because the alliance is so fragile. Yet in doing so, and becoming an uncritical mirror of the client's projective process, the consultant can easily help undermine the conditions necessary for organizational change and development. Alternatively, attention to projective identification as a process can increase a consultant's ability to join with a client and establish the feelings of being understood which are necessary to begin work. In one instance, for example, one author experienced utter incompetence and ineffectiveness in a meeting with a group of third-year pediatric residents who were meeting to discuss their new leadership roles. At the second session, the consultant interpreted his experiences and what he had been made to feel at the first session as a reflection of what it was like to be a leader in their setting. As a result, a working alliance was established because the group felt he understood their culture and the challenges they faced.

With consultant teams, different members may be selected as targets for different aspects of the presenting situation. For example, in the Juvenile Justice setting, one consultant was mobilized by the grandiosity themes in the system and was actively suggesting the use of idealized design as a structured process; while at the same time the other consultant was filled up



with the stuckness, depression, and the difficulty of the site. Or with the information service company, the junior consultant "contained" the client systems doubts about the value of the idealized strategic plan to authentically guide operations. If understood, these projections in the consultant team can increase its ability to decipher some of the inner tensions from the host organization. If simply enacted, they stymie the ability of the consultants to think and act, just as they have inside the client organization .

One quite typical problem that can be understood in terms of projective identification is the tendency for consultants to overfunction. Projection of massive competence and responsibility into the consultant, when enacted collusively by the consultant, serves to impoverish further the client system's ability to address important issues. The anxieties that underlie organizational problems and the fantasies that can be evoked in efforts to address them can easily lead to a primitive splitting process in which the consultant is idealized as a potential savior and the organization itself devalued. The interplay of this dynamic with the substantive issues under consideration provides a critical window into the deeper dimensions of what the consultant is, in fantasy, being expected to do.

With projective identification, the recipient of the projection, in whom parts of the projector are lodged, is no longer felt to be a separate person. In terms of the consulting relationship, this process can powerfully pull the consultant out of roles and into roles that are much more appropriate for actual members of the organization. The overfunctioning consultant often takes on a kind of executive staff role that unintentionally reinforces fantasies of internal incompetence and efforts to sidestep responsibility for difficult actions.

In terms of the management of intervention efforts, one important implication of this

discussion is the need for consultant teams (and individuals via supervision) to create occasions to work on these dynamics. Sometimes, as with the information systems company, projective dynamics can only be discovered when a consulting team seeks out consultation itself. The first requirement is paying careful attention to one's feelings during work episodes with the clients and accepting these experiences as valid data about the social field. The capacity to work productively with projective processes in real time is to a very large measure a function of the consultant's self-understanding. For example, the key interaction described in the Juvenile Justice Agency did not arise from any scheduled focus on team interactions, but erupted as friction in the work relationship of two consultants; it was only later understood in the context of the work.

One difficulty in discerning the presence of mirrored dynamics arises from the natural tendencies that each individual brings to consulting. For example, one consultant may have a personal valence toward overfunctioning, another toward underfunctioning. When they enter a system, each will tend to be potentiated by congruent strains in the system. The difficulty is then to distinguish what is induced in each by the work with the client from what is present in each simply as a function of individual personalities.

Two points have been useful as guideposts in understanding these situations. Experiencing oneself as somewhat "out of character" or acting in ways that seem slightly odd is indicative of unconscious communication from the client system. An example of this was again in the information services company when the two team experienced an uncharacteristic difficulty with collaboration as well as an unusual inability to discuss it openly. Hornstein (1980) offers a list of indicators of what he terms "counterreactions," such as depressed feelings,

repeated carelessness over arrangements, gossiping, and anxiety over the stakes of the consultancy.

However, we have also found in client systems an uncanny ability to tap into and to use pre-existing valences and differences within the consultants. With consultant teams, different members may be selected as targets for different aspects of the presenting situation. As mentioned, at the beginning of the Juvenile Justice project, one consultant was particularly receptive to the Commissioner's grand hopes for transformation and another was particularly sensitive to the difficulties and barriers to such change. This splitting in the client system around these issues was projected into the consultant team and served to amplify a long-standing, pre-existing difference between the two consultants over organizational intervention methods. Distinguishing what is valid information about the client system under such conditions can be difficult.

Learning to understand the impact of projective identification in the consulting relationship can be a vital source of information about the client system's unconscious functioning and about how to work more effectively. If not considered, however, projective identification creates forces that can easily lead consultants to work along pathways that unintentionally collude with their client system's defensive self-understanding or can readily induce consultants into potentially destructive roles. By using the insights developed in psychoanalytic practice in the arena of organizational consultation, consultants are provided with an invaluable window into the unconscious dimensions of a client system. Using this tool requires self-reflection and puts the consultant-client relationship squarely in the center of diagnostic and intervention efforts.

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