7

What Do We Represent to Each Other?

*Understanding Projection
and Negotiating Conflict*

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*We need only to think of the people whom we judge or
dislike or against whom we hold secret prejudices to find
ourselves in the grip of our [own] darker nature.*

—Zweig and Abrams (2001, p. xvi)

The shadow [we see in others] is [often] the rest of who we are.

—Brewi and Brennan (2001, p. 261)

Recently I was explaining the ideas of this chapter to a former student who happened to drop by my office as I was writing. As I explained the concept of projection, he said that he had had a recent experience that was a perfect example for me to use. He told me of a friendship with a young woman in which she had actively pursued him

romantically for a while. Apparently she would not give up the chase (this is his side of the story, after all) and that this had created enough conflicted tension in their relationship that he was having a hard time even being friends. I asked him why. He explained that she told him that she saw him as a perfect catch because he was an African American male who is not only handsome but is in graduate school, working toward a professional career, has his act together, and so on. He represented those idealized qualities that she was apparently looking for. He did have an intimate relationship with her briefly, but told her that his long-term plans had to come first for now and that they should be just friends. She was confused because she had assumed that he was *the one* and that, in fact, she felt that God had affirmed this for her during prayer. How could he not see the same truth? She was angry because the intimate relationship did not continue but also because he did not live up to her idealized notion (and her probably idealized story of their relationship) of a "perfect catch," and this lead to conflict for them. You can see how the qualities she projected onto him led to pressure to live up to the ideal and how this led to withdrawal by him since he did not want to live up to that image. His withdrawal led to disappointment for her, as she was sure this relationship was meant to be ("God told me that you're the one, but now you're telling me that you're not . . . ?"), and then to conflicted tensions in their friendship. She apparently has not given up the chase for her ideal man and may end up in the same college for graduate school. Such is the power of faith in our projections; they can be so real to us, whether idealized or negative.

In conflicts such as the one just summarized, people often see motives, qualities, characteristics, and desires in another person that are really projections of something in themselves, and sometimes that something is related to an ideal that is not really part of the other person's true identity. Projections are often images of our own peculiarities and experiences that we think belong to the other in the conflict. This way, the other person can come to symbolize our own often dark motives or our own ideals. In terms of communication, it is a short step from negative projection to both blaming the other and to justifying competitive, aggressive, or even violent conflict behavior. It is also a short step from idealized projection to disappointment when the other person does not meet those ideals, and it's another short step to conflicted tension and blame that can lead to conflict when the other feels pressured to change in order to live up to the ideal.

This chapter provides a way of gaining insight into the how's and the why's of constructing negative and idealized projections in conflict. We will explore how people symbolically construct projections and what this means within the dynamics of conflict communication and as

a source of learning. Key questions include the following: How do people create and integrate their projections into the process of conflict communication? How can we learn to recognize, and possibly confront, our projections as a way of improving our conflict communication skills? How can we use this understanding and learning to negotiate conflict more effectively?

Main topics and learning goals in this chapter:

- Learning to read between the projections
- Projection and the symbolic relationship of people in conflict
- Projection and conflict discourse patterns and dynamics
- The connection between projection and enemy making and blame
- The limiting effects of projection
- From projection to integration: Negotiating new meanings
- Lessons from the field of practice

There is a lot of truth to the adage that we should be careful how we talk about others, because much of the time we are talking about ourselves. This is particularly true when it comes to issues of guilt and blame—we often accuse others of the things that we feel guilty of ourselves deep down. Projection is also connected to the darker emotions, such as jealousy and possessiveness, that are at the core of many relational conflicts. How often is it that people who are possessive about where their relational partners are and who they are talking to end up being the ones who are at least thinking about cheating? In such cases, they are likely to be projecting their guilt onto the other. How often is jealousy fueled by the perception that someone else has the quality or characteristic that you most desire for yourself? As a personal preparation exercise, ask yourself the following questions to begin exploring projection in your conflicts so that you will be ready to explore those of others with care and sensitivity:

- What qualities and characteristics, and motives (positive or negative) do I most often see in the actions of others in everyday life and specifically when I am in conflict with them?
- What things do I tend to accuse others of without evidence? Are there any feelings of guilt on your part that these accusations are connected to?
- How have feelings of jealousy or possessiveness fueled conflicts that I have been part of, and how are they possibly connected to projections?

- How do these perceptions form a somewhat consistent pattern in how I view others?
- What do these judgments—negative or idealized—actually say about myself?
- How do these judgments impact my conflict practices and style and my typical experiences of conflict?
- How do my patterns of projection affect how I make sense of and explain what's happening in someone else's conflict as an outside observer (bear this question in mind as you examine the following story)?

Now that you have thought about your own experiences with projection, let's move on to examine a relationship at a crossroads moment and how understanding projection might be important in enabling the couple to negotiate their relationship past that moment to an ending or a new beginning.

❖ LEARNING TO READ BETWEEN THE PROJECTIONS

Taking a look at the following story is a way to become familiar with interpreting the dynamics of communication as they reflect habits and tactics of projection. This is a lot like reading between the lines for the way things connect together in the story. We will consider and apply more theoretical concepts as we move through the chapter. For now, familiarize yourself with as many as possible of the ways that projection works in this specific conflict. We do not always have the luxury of having access to both sides of a story. The following narrative (as told by Robyn, a researcher) outlines the perspective of one conflict participant for us. It is a long story, but it details a great deal of projected images by the narrator, Terry, and we can guess at the impact of the pressure that those images create in her relationship and communication with James. On your first read-through, (1) try to imagine James's perspective and the divisive impact that Terry's projections might have from his side. Then (2) go through the story carefully, paragraph by paragraph, as you follow the concepts of the chapter, and note or underline any signs of or clues to the various forms of projection that you think might be going on. (3) Note carefully how each of those examples of projection connects to the conflict and perhaps even stimulates the energy of the conflict. Try to piece together how the projections are part of why they now stand at an important crossroads in their relationship. After reading between the lines of the projections on both sides, we will develop some ways that

the couple might negotiate a new meaning for their relationship. The new meaning is likely to be either an ending or a new beginning, but they are unlikely to be at their current crossroads for long given that it seems that an important conflict is brewing.

What's Love Got to Do With It? (Robyn)
    James and Terry sitting in a tree . . . K-I-S-S-I-N-G
    First comes the love
    Then comes the marriage
    Then comes James with the baby carriage

Terry's Side of the Conflict
    I met James at the beach after I graduated from high school, during senior week. I was there with some of the girls I graduated with, and he was there with some of his friends. He was a soldier in the army, stationed at Ft. Bragg, so when we were home, we were only 30 minutes away from each other. I thought it was strange that it took us being at Myrtle Beach at the same time for us to meet, but I was glad we did. He told me at first that his name was Angel, and I thought he looked like one. He also reminded me so much of the good things in my father. It didn't matter that I was younger than him. I was 18 and he was 23.
    My parents have been in a happy marriage for more than 20 years. I've always wanted a love like theirs—a faithful husband and wife who come together to raise children and build their lives together. My parents made it seem easy. While I watched so many of my friend's families deteriorate because of divorce, abuse, and other problems, I was proud of mine, yet I was anxious to have my own.
    People have always told me how pretty I am, and girls always seem to envy me because of my looks, thinking that my life must be easy and that I was automatically lucky in love. I wasn't. All I ever wanted was someone to love me. Most of the men I dated in high school were only interested in having sex with me or having the "beauty queen" on their arm, but none of those relationships ever lasted.
    Most of my past relationships didn't mean anything to me. I found myself always looking for love instead of letting it find me, and I have gotten my heart broken in the process. I felt that things would be different with James because for once I wasn't looking, and this is when it seemed that fate brought us together. At first he gave me a lot of attention and made me feel like a woman. I knew I loved him almost immediately. I fell in love with him because of how it made me feel to be with him. I would have done anything to be with him even though my parents disapproved. I felt that our relationship could stand just about anything and, the 1st year, it did.
    After we were together for a while, he told me that his name wasn't really Angel and that he had a son from a previous relationship. He said that he had custody of his son because the child's mother didn't want him, but the mother was taking care of him while James was in the military. I understood why he waited to tell me—he wanted to make sure we would be together. I decided that I loved him and was therefore willing to be a mother to his son. I knew that they were a package deal.

After James and I got closer, he told me that he was married but that he was working to get an annulment. He said he didn't love her—his wife—and had only married her so that she could stay in the States. He told me about her when she was being transferred to Fort Bragg so I wouldn't be surprised. I was glad he told me about her when he did. I knew ahead of time that she would try to break us up with her lies, so I was prepared. I was glad when the annulment went through and knew that James had chosen me. I thought we would be together forever, but the more faithful I was to him, the less interested he became.

I didn't ask James a lot of questions about his life, because I figured if he wanted me to know things, he would tell me and I wouldn't have to ask. I was raised in the church and want to make my relationship with God better. I have asked James to go with me to church but he refused. He said that he was a Muslim and that I shouldn't try to change him.

I accepted him because I loved him. I trust James, but I know that sometimes he lies to me. We were together for almost a year before he broke up with me— saying that he didn't want to hurt me. I tried to go on with my life, but I couldn't get him out of my mind or out of my system. I knew if he ever wanted me back, I would go running. My mother introduced me to a lot of "church men," but I wasn't interested in them. I compare everyone to James. I liked some of the qual- ities the other men had, but they weren't James. It seemed I wanted a man with the morals of who my mother brought to me but who looked like James and smelled like James and talked like James. I prayed that God would bring him back to me, and eventually he did. We got back together on New Year's Eve, and I truly felt it was the beginning to a wonderful relationship, but I was wrong.

After we got back together, James told me he wanted me to have his baby. I was so happy because I felt that he wanted the same things I wanted in life, to get married and have a family. Our relationship became serious and we got busy trying to make our baby. I found out I was pregnant in April and I was so happy. I thought James would be happy as well, but I really couldn't tell. He wasn't very supportive during the pregnancy and made me feel like I didn't matter to him. I thought that having a baby might bring us closer, but it only seemed to make him less interested in me. I hoped that once the baby was born, he would change.

I gave birth to our daughter a week before Thanksgiving. She was beautiful. Everyone said how much she looked like me, but I was desperate to find traces of James in her. He seemed disappointed that she didn't look as much like him as his son did. For a long time, he acted like the baby wasn't his, but the more she grew, the more he would come around. But his interest was only in the baby. He began to ignore me. He told me that there was no "us" anymore because we had a baby.

I didn't give up on James because I love him. He hasn't really done a lot for the baby, but he explained that he can't afford to do much because he has to send money home for his son and pay his own bills. I don't complain as long as he does what he can. He buys her diapers every now and then. I hope things will be a lot better when we are married.

I'm getting tired of how James treats me. He talks to me like I am a child and demeans me every chance he gets. He makes me feel stupid. I am beginning to

resent how much I changed to be with him. Sometimes I don't recognize myself. I used to want to be a model, but James is a Muslim and doesn't want me to wear makeup. I want to make him happy, but I don't feel that he does anything to make me happy. It just doesn't seem like he cares, even when she took her first steps. He goes weeks at a time without seeing her, and the only time we ever talk is when I call him. His phone is in my name and I find myself wondering if he is not talking to me, who is he talking to?

I've been praying a lot lately, and my pastor told me that I may end up settling for less than I deserve if I stay in the relationship. I love James, but I don't think he loves me as much, and I am afraid that when we get married, things will get worse instead of better. I want to have the same perfect family for my daughter that I had growing up. Every time I tell James I don't think it's going to work, he apologizes and promises that things will change. I don't know if I believe him any more.

I had a dream the other night that I was back together with my ex-boyfriend, the one whose heart I broke to go back with James. I don't want to have any regrets, but I don't really know what I want. I want to feel loved and appreciated, and James doesn't make me feel that way. Patrick, my ex-boyfriend, did. I wonder if I should call him and see how he is doing.

Initial Discussion Questions for Terry's Story

- What forms of idealized projection are important in her story? Look closely at her relationship history and role models and how these assumptions suggest that she is projecting her hopes and dreams and her angelic character onto James—her "Angel."
- How are her projections connected to how she feels about him, how are they connected to him representing her father's qualities, and how are they also part of why she falls in love with James?
- How are each of her projections challenged by the facts, and how does this tension between ideal and actual create relational tensions and conflict within their relationship?
- What forms of projection are also hinted at in the role of third parties in the story—female rivals, past boyfriends, his ex-wife, the baby, and so on?
- How do Terry's projections create a realistic or unrealistic picture of James, and how is this related to their subsequent relational conflict?
- What pressure do these assumptions put on James, and how do you think these idealized projections affect their communication and lead to conflicts in their everyday relationship?
- What, if any, are the negative forms of projection evident in her story?

- What forms of active and passive projections seem to be evident in her story and with what effect on their relationship?
- How might her projections affect the dynamics of their relationship in terms of using words as projectiles, the role of hooks and triggers, and their relationship as both lovers and possible enemies?
- What characteristics of James seem to form a hook for Terry's projections, and what issues or factors in her life trigger her projections?
- Try to imagine in detail how he might tell their relational conflict story from his perspective if he were being completely honest with you. How might her projections be sources of conflict for him?
- How might James's story contain elements of projection from his perspective in terms of what positive or negative projections Terry represents for him (note, for example, his reaction to her desire to model and how he talks to her like she is immature)?
- More broadly, how do Terry's projections limit her communication and her relationships in some important ways?
- How might you advise Terry to move toward more integration in her intimate relationship with James and in her relationships more generally?
- The story ends with her rethinking things with Patrick. How are her final thoughts, shared with us at the end of her story, also based on idealized projections?

Organizing Your Interpretations

Take your answers to the foregoing questions and summarize them around the following three interpretive research steps:

Step 1: Description

Describe the specific story examples of projection on both sides and how they affect Terry and James's communication. To do this, go through the story carefully and examine each type of projection and what it tells you about the people in the conflict and what it does within the various relationships in the story. Working with each example of projection in the story, from her school relationships with girls and boys and her family through to the present as she dreams about an ex-boyfriend, try to identify what rhetorical function it serves in constructing the qualities, characteristics, and particularly the apparent motives of James in the conflict. Indicate, also, what this might imply about Terry.

Step 2: Reduction to Themes

Thematize the examples so that you get a sense of the deeper meaning of their conflict. To do this, boil down the various examples of projection to how they cluster around core oppositions or themes (such as unrealistic or unmet expectations) between them that are central to why they are at this crossroads moment. Examine each of the oppositions and possible projections explicated in your description for the more fundamental or essential oppositions. Pay particular attention to how projections cluster around affirming desirable qualities for the narrator and negative qualities to the other.

Step 3: Interpretation

Interpret how these core oppositions generate the conflicts in their relationship and how these oppositions might provide opportunities for good topics and questions they might address in order to renegotiate their relationship. To do this, imagine how their habits of projection might actually provide useful ways of talking about their differences and their desires for a relationship. To interpret the meaning, you may have to decide which oppositions appear to be projections of the narrator's shadow (negative projections) and light (idealized projections) and which are just descriptors of the opponent that are obvious from the action and might be fair characterizations. You have to decide if something is being projected from the self in the depiction of the other and what those projections might be (for example, guilt, fears about being perceived a particular way, and so on) and why they occur. There are fairly direct projections, such as guilt, and there are more subtle projections that are connected to the hopes and fears of the narrator that may intensify or magnify a depiction of the other (for example, Terry's maturity and responsibility highlight James's immaturity and irresponsibility).

A Cautionary Note on Analyzing Stories for Symbolic Projection

There are a couple of cautionary notes that are important to consider at this point. First, guard against having an overly mechanistic or dualistic concept of projection, in which we see a self projecting interior experiences onto an exterior other—sort of like a movie image on a blank screen. Rather, we should consider projection as an ongoing co-construction in which the other participants are engaged with us in the unfolding of projections and their impact on the conflicted communication. Projections create the conditions for additional projections, and this dynamic interplay is important to understand in following the

cycles and escalations of conflicts. This cautionary note is particularly important in terms of approaching conflict from a communication perspective in that we should not assume communication is merely the outward manifestation of people's psychology. Rather, as conflicts evolve, escalate, and polarize because of projection, particular projections will emerge as a result of the communication dynamics. These emergent projections will, in turn, fuel changes in the content and dynamics of the conflict. From the story we have and from imagining James's story, perhaps you can trace how projections might have emerged, solidified, and become reference points for each person's perceptions and communication as their relationship evolved and then devolved to where they are now.

Second, when analyzing conflicts that we are not directly involved with, we should also be cautious about how our subjective judgments impact how we portray the people and their projections. We should try to view the conflict from within the participants' frames of reference. This way, the projections we see in the conflict communication of others are not simply projections of our own desires and fears about ourselves as communicators. Projections are difficult to identify since they are, by definition, unconscious and unintended, so the key thing is cautious inquiry into what seem like important patterns of projection. We may not see all of the projections evident in communication. Similarly, we may see patterns that are not there as we bring our own experiences to the interpretive process. Not every quality or characteristic that one side uses to depict the other is a projection; sometimes that quality may actually be evident in their behavior. This caution is also particularly important in that we are engaging in interpretive research as we collect and interpret stories. As such, much of the time we are engaged in smart guesswork and working hypotheses as we interpret the meaning of other people's communication. If you could hear both sides of the story, there is probably one side that you would tend to agree with more than the other. Perhaps you see elements of yourself and your own relational history in the stories. Note how these might influence your reading of the story, and try to be conscious of those connections to you as you interpret the stories.

❖ PROJECTION AND THE SYMBOLIC RELATIONSHIP OF PEOPLE IN CONFLICT

As Von Franz (1982) shows us, projection involves the "unperceived and unintentional, transfer of subjective psychic elements onto an

outer object" (p. 3). This outer object is usually another person, but it could be another group, gender, race, tribe, or nation (Karasawa, 2003). War rhetoric can be a good example of how we transfer negative qualities onto our enemies (Parry-Giles, 1994). This may go so far as to mean the enemy gets constructed as evil (Ricouer, 1967). In the case of more everyday conflict, it is usually the persons with whom we are in conflict that we construct in this way. Projections are usually of qualities, characteristics, or motives we see in the other that can be positive (idealized) or negative. In the case of positive projections, people project their own desires, wishes, qualities they see in themselves, and even their deepest passions onto another (Kearns, 1986; Thomsen, 1941). This is often based on feelings of empathy and complementarity with others whom we perceive as like ourselves or who we would like to be like in some way (Cary, 1987; Stein, 1986). In the case of negative projections, the unconscious or unperceived and unintentional nature of projection can be either active or passive. Each of these types and aspects of projection as they manifest in and structure communication have implications for conflict. As you explore projection, bear in mind the challenge that Hauk (2000) develops for us. Building on Kristeva's (1981) work, Hauk (2000) challenges us to acknowledge and own the differences and contradictions within ourselves and our identities rather than simply unloading them on to others through projections in order to build ourselves up.

Idealized and Negative Projections

Projection of idealized or positive qualities and characteristics often results in an overvaluation and admiration of the other. For example, if you desire to be seen as having particular qualities, such as wisdom, power, and good judgment, but you do not normally associate those qualities with yourself, then you may project them onto others in order to experience those qualities in action. The gods of ancient legends and mythologies often served this function for civilizations. In terms of human relationships, the other person then comes to symbolically personify those qualities as does the young man in the opening story. In relationships, if you have ever heard the phrase, "you remind me so much of my father (or mother)," and it's meant in a nice way, you are probably in an idealized projection scenario. It's useful to recognize that such a compliment comes with benefits and possible pitfalls as it is often based on a projection. In corporate settings, many of us tend to associate status and power with knowledge and wisdom because we desire status and power and the qualities we associate with

them. Another typical projection in our culture is the association we make between beauty and wealth and happiness. Assuming that people are happy because they are rich reflects a desire many of us have for wealth and perhaps all of us have for happiness. Imagine in Terry and James's relationship how their projections helped construct a fragile and ultimately unsatisfying version of "happiness."

In intimate, family, and working relationships, we may also avoid opening up conflicts because we see them as more powerful, perceiving in them our desired qualities and not in ourselves. This way, conflicts are often avoided as the projector overestimates the power of the other. Last, a common source of relational conflict occurs when one or both parties create an idealized projected image of the other ("you're just like my father," or, "you're the perfect `girl next door' for me"), and then the other cannot or does not want to live up to that image. That person typically get pressurized to change and blamed for that failure by the projector if the change does not occur. I have heard this archetypal story many times in one form or another.

Negative projections are more common in the to-and-fro of conflicts as conflict tends to stir up emotions that are deeply and often unconsciously connected to our darker and more shadowy emotions, perceptions, and experiences. The idea is that we often make misjudgments about others based on some quality of ourselves that we project onto them. Normally we might correct such misjudgments based on insight—realizing that they are mainly symbolic manifestations of our shadowy selves or what Kristeva (1981) calls the stranger in ourselves. However, in the competitive environment of a conflict, we often cling to, and even accentuate, those judgments of others that are based on our own qualities or early experiences. We assume that the other is a tangible manifestation—a paradigm—of those qualities rather than a symbolic expression of them. Projection often has a profound impact on the dynamics of a conflict and the participants' ability to negotiate cooperation. Negative projection occurs when a current situation is reminiscent of an early experience of a negative quality associated with a particular category of people—fathers as tyrants, for example. The quality of "tyrant" is projected onto people who play a fatherlike or authoritative role. Working relationships with bosses might be an obvious application of such a projection. And the person may unconsciously behave just as tyrannically. The quality that people most dislike in others is, ironically, a projection of self. Think beneath Terry and James's relationship and imagine what conflict might have emerged if Terry had insisted on pursuing her modeling aspirations. Why might James have become something of a tyrant in that case? Are there elements of his own immaturity that he projects onto her that are important?

Passive and Active Projection

Passive projection or "unconscious empathy" (Von Franz, 1982, p. 16) occurs when the projector feels a sympathy that connects to the other. The projectors bring the other into relationship with them by detaching a feeling or quality from themselves and placing it onto the other. This is the basis of perspective taking and of the formation of social relationships, such as friendships. Hence, passive projection is the basis of developing *connection* or a feeling of combination with the other. For example, if a positive characteristic or quality, such as being caring or trustworthy, is projected from you onto another person, then you will see the quality that you value in yourself in the other person. This is one of the bases of feeling that you have things in common with someone and that you like that other person. As you might imagine, this passive form of projection is most commonly associated with positive projection and with the ability to work effectively with another with whom you may be conflicting.

Active projection occurs when you project a characteristic in order to create a distinction or *opposition* between yourself and the other person. This is most commonly associated with negative projection in that a quality or characteristic is projected from one person onto another, but the projectors are focused on showing how they are not like the persons with whom they are in conflict.

Given that we tend to associate negatives with others and not ourselves, active projection tends to be those things we most want to avoid seeing in ourselves. As you examine Terry and James's story, you might notice that most of the negative qualities they both point to in the other person are things that they do not want to be viewed as in themselves. Thinking beneath the story, you will start to see some key oppositions set up between the relational partners in which they point to a quality in the other that directly opposes a quality they see, or would like to see, in themselves. This is when you know that you are likely dealing with an interconnected and dynamic system of active and negative projections. Examining these interconnected oppositions is a very important starting point for possible dialogue and renegotiation of the relationship.

Discussion Questions

- What are the various positive projections that are evident in the relationship of Terry and James?
- What specific negative projections do you think are going on in their relationship?

- Where do these negative projections come from, and how do they fuel the conflict?
- Are there any passive projections evident in their relationship? If not, why not?
- How are the various forms of projection related to the quality of their relationship?
- How might you use these oppositions as a starting point for them discussing and learning from the conflict, if you could mediate between them?
- How do the aforementioned forms of projection figure into a significant recent, ongoing, or as yet unexpressed conflict in your life?

Discussion Questions for Further
Exploring Terry and James's Projections

Now that you have explicated the possible projections in both sides of the story, use the following questions to discuss the effects that these oppositional projections have on Terry and James's conflict.

- How do the oppositional projections that you have uncovered form part of the underlying conflict patterns that are repeating between these people?
- How do the oppositional projections provide energy and direction for the conflict as it unfolds in communication?
- How might their communication in the face-to-face conflict and in their discussions with others about the conflict affirm and solidify their projections and related versions of each other in the conflict? How does communication help to constitute their perceptions that are the basis of their communication?
- If you were able to work with these people in helping them to understand and manage their conflict, what specific insights could your analysis of projections provide them in stimulating understanding and communication about the conflict? Create a list of these as possible topics for discussion and questions they might explore together.
- What do you need to be cautious about as you interpret their conflict for their projections?
- What habits of projection in *your* conflicts, if any, come to mind as you analyze the two sides of Terry and James's conflict?

❖ PROJECTION AND CONFLICT
    DISCOURSE PATTERNS AND DYNAMICS

Projections are part of the underlying meaning structure of conflicts.
Projections seem to provide both the means by which people under-
stand their mutual roles in conflicts and many opportunities to mis-
understand each other. Projections provide part of the meaning of
conflicts and are, at the same time, often constructed from the commu-
nication through which the conflict takes place. This interplay of pro-
jections can lead to repeating patterns of conflict, emotional distance,
and loss across several generations of relationships such as in families
(Taylor, 2003). This interplay can also be linked to the escalation of con-
flict in that projections tend to feed off each other and make the other
seem farther and farther away (Holtz & Miller, 2001). Murderous
images of others and violence toward them may even be connected to
the projected externalization of one's own fears and desires (Kimbles,
2000; Loewenberg, 1999; Mizen, 2003). How might Terry and James's
relationship devolve into one that is hateful in some ways?

From Projections to Projectiles

Von Franz (1997) describes the process by which unconscious neg-
ative projections can become directed into attacking the other. She says,
"As soon as a person projects a bit of his [*sic*] shadow onto another
human being he [*sic*] is incited to . . . rancorous speech" (pp. 19–25).
Projection in a conflict can lead to words becoming projectiles. This
boundary between projection and projectile is crossed when words get
thrown at the other person instead of engaging him or her and the
issues of the conflict. Then conflicts start to be about attacking others
and their positions in the conflicts and their "face" and may even be
associated with feelings of wanting to harm or destroy them. The
words that hit the other person—like projectiles—symbolize and carry
the negative flow of energy directed against the other by the one who
is projecting. As Von Franz explains, "When one becomes the target of
another person's negative projection, one often experiences that hatred
almost physically as a projectile" (p. 21). Words are coming at you and
feel hard to take. In turn, you will often have a physical reaction that
can be equal and oppositional. You may want to throw hard words
at them in response. The conflict can escalate quickly into a mutual
verbal attack.

Discussion Questions

- What specific words and phrases in the story provide clues for us that Terry and James might, under certain circumstances, use words as projectiles?
- How would projections help to create such a context, and what might be some of the projectiles that they might throw at each other?
- Think of a time in a conflicted conversation when you used words to attack another person. Did you feel like harming them? What effects did your attack have on the conflict?

Hooks and Triggers in Conflicted Communication

One way to examine hooks is to think about the characteristics of someone with whom you are in a close relationship that drive you nuts or that make you automatically see that person as the bad person. Another way is to examine your preconceived notions about certain types of people. Complete the following sentences as an example of how to tap into these hooks: "I automatically trust people who . . . "; "I automatically distrust people who . . . " You can change the sentence to "am attracted to," or "am not attracted to," and so on. You likely make assumptions about people based on those characteristics you have built associations with in your earlier life.

When you are able to hook a characteristic onto another, then something will likely trigger the projection. Previously, I have discussed the important role of so-called hot buttons in promoting volatility and stimulating conflicts to emerge or erupt (Kellett & Dalton, 2001, p. 7). A hot button is a form of trigger. Triggers get pulled when we see specific characteristics that are hooks for us in the behavior of the other. For example, think about how Terry builds up a picture of James based on a few characteristics, such as his angelic persona and, later, his immaturity and irresponsibility. What is it about him that provides both the hook for that assumption and everything else that goes with it and then triggers the projections that are suggested in her story? Usually, there is some reminder or characteristic that the projector is able to connect the projected image to. For example, if the person shows some element of tyrannical behavior, then the full image of the other as a tyrant can be projected. The scripted but unconscious way of dealing with tyrants is then triggered.

Discussion Questions

- What characteristics or qualities seem to be hooks for Terry and James to stereotype each other, and how do these hooks get triggered into projections for them?
- What are some of the hooks that are important to you in generating conflicts with certain types of people or with someone you are close to?
- How do these hooks get triggered into projections and then into conflicts?
- What do these hooks enable you to project onto them?
- How can understanding the hooks and triggers of someone you are close to, and your own in relation to that person, help account for the type of conflicts that the two of you have?

❖ THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PROJECTION
AND ENEMY MAKING AND BLAME

Negative projection is not always about constructing enemies of others, but it is closely connected. Sometimes we project what is culturally devalued, feared, or misunderstood onto others to build ourselves up. They become the shadow—the qualities about ourselves we wish to deny—and we become the light—the qualities about ourselves we wish to affirm. It may also be that in the to and fro of conflict, the shadow and light are reversed for them—we become their shadow as well. This synergy of shadow and light is often at the core of our conflicts as it allows us to distinguish ourselves from the others and place ourselves above them—and vice versa. Both of these are important aspects of creating the opposition of a competitive conflict. For example, Griffin (2001) provides an interesting account of chauvinism based on projection. A portrait of the other is drawn in which the parts of the self that the chauvinist most wants to deny are made dark to the self and projected onto the other—hence, for example, to a man, a woman is seen as irrational and overemotional. This also allows him the construction of a false self, one that stands for valorized qualities: rationality and emotional control. Competing over these definitions and what they mean is often what people fight about in conflicts. Fjerkenstad (2001) similarly traces the rhetoric of criminality to the construction of an image of the criminal as a representation of all that the rest of us do not want to be, and therefore we become reasonable and law abiding. Thus, projection

is one way of creating the self as virtuous and other as the villainous bad guy.

It is not very far from this sort of negative projection to enemy making. In fact, Keen (1991) goes so far as to challenge us to think about ourselves as *Homo hostilus*—the enemy-making animal. It's not a very heroic image but one that does capture a great deal of how we humans spend our energy—making enemies of others so that we feel good about ourselves. This notion of *Homo hostilus* suggests that we rhetorically construct the image of the enemy through projections of our own undesirable qualities and characteristics that can demonize the other. This works most obviously in a political and rhetorical sense in terms of constructing the other during wartime, but it also captures how we often relate to others in personal conflicts as our temporary enemies. This enemy making serves the vital dual purpose of (1) allowing those qualities that we cannot tolerate in ourselves to be unconsciously and painlessly attributed to our enemies, thereby (2) absolving ourselves of the guilt of those qualities (Zweig & Abrams, 2001, p. xvi).

Projection thus helps us create enmity and this is central to generating the energy for conflicts. At the same time, the enmity is connected to our typical narrative goal in conflicts, that of being viewed as the hero or victim and not the villain. The evil is seen to be in the actions and heart of the other, and this can become a ready-made archetypal argument for our actions in the conflict. Projection is in this way tied to both redemption—the removal of evil, guilt, or blame from the self—and to virtue—the maintenance of valor and goodness. Reduced to the basics, projection enables us to blame the other; it also allows us to avoid blaming ourselves even as we escalate and polarize the conflict. Herein lies the greatest challenge as we look for ways of working with projections and their relationship to communication. As Dan Bar-on (2000) shows us in relation to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it is not always giving up the war or the conflict that is the hardest part of achieving peace. Rather, a visible enemy and the rhetorically energizing force that the enemy provides can be the most difficult thing to give up.

The key to becoming more intelligent as a communicator is to understand patterns, and one of the important patterns here is the relationship between self and other as light and dark. The challenge is to become more conscious of the representation of another as our own shadow. The unconscious imagery and archetypes by which we construct our enemies and by which they construct us are keys to understanding why they are, in fact, partly our enemies and at the same time partly ourselves. If we could act on this intelligence, the results in our conflicts might be quite meaningful.

Discussion Questions

- We cannot know for sure what Terry and James are projecting per se and what judgments are based on reasonable interpretations of their opponents' actions. Given this caution, what qualities do you think might be being projected onto the other and what qualities are therefore being affirmed in themselves?
- In what ways do they have the potential to be hostile to each other?
- In what ways do both narrators experience and construct the other as their potential enemy, and on what qualities or actions of the other is this enmity based?
- In what specific ways does redemption of the self and blame of the other get constructed in each side of the story, and how are projections important in this process?
- If their conflict escalated into a very difficult and emotional exchange, what would it take for each of them to give up the other as their enemy, if that is even possible? What might be some important first steps if this seems unrealistic?
- How would you advise Terry and James to become more conscious of their patterns of representing themselves and others? For example, how might they explore other conflict experiences with similar people for clues about their patterns of projection?

❖ THE LIMITING EFFECTS OF PROJECTION

Although projection seems to be a normal part of how people engage in conflicts—certainly in the escalation phase—it can be limiting in how we relate to people and the kinds of solutions and resolutions we achieve. As Taylor (2003) argues, it is often difficult to think beyond conflicts into a different future state when the story we have does not support change. It is work to change the patterns we have become locked into. Nagy (1991, p. 84) expands this point by challenging us to "emerge" from our projections where possible, because our reliance on projection can limit us in the following important ways:

- First, projections can keep you *unconscious* of important aspects of a conflict. In particular, it can limit your ability to see beyond the characteristic you see in the other. Therefore, you may remain blinded to your own qualities, characteristics, and possibly dark motives as a participant in the conflict. You can get caught up in the busy rhetorical work of constructing the other person and lose sight of who you are in

the conflict. You may also remain blind to the meaning of the conflict as you focus your communicative energy on the other person and what he or she represents to you.

• Second, this blinding aspect of projection can make you overly *vulnerable.* If you are focused on either idealizing or simplifying the other down to some characteristics that enable you to view yourself as the good guy and the other person as the bad guy, you will become vulnerable to the complexity of a conflict. If you are focusing your energy on projecting motives and qualities onto the other, you will likely miss some of the possibilities in the conflict for change, learning, and resolution. You may also miss the other person's true motives and characteristics, and this can make you vulnerable to making tactical moves in the conflict that are not wise. Also, as you are focusing on the other person, the conflict process can evolve in a direction that you are not ready for. Another important vulnerability is to the negative emotions that are often connected to projection, such as jealousy, envy, anger, and so on.

• Last, habitual projection can *inhibit your maturation* as a communicator. To see the other simplistically as idealized or villainous reduces your ability to see your own involvement in the conflict and take responsibility for it. It also limits your ability to take the perspective of the other, which is a key component of a mature and tolerant communicator. You cannot grow as a communicator if the other is always the villain and you are always the victim or hero.

Discussion Questions

• In what ways do Terry and James remain unconscious of important dimensions of the conflict as well as important dimensions of themselves?
• In what ways do they make themselves *and* the process of conflict vulnerable to escalation and breakdown?
• How might maturing beyond the level of projection they display help them in other aspects of their relationship, as parents, and in their lives as communicators?
• What advice would you give to help them to approach the conflict with a more developed sense of how they are limiting their communication through projection? How might this advice help them develop perspective-taking skills?
• What could both of them learn about their conflicts from your analysis?

❖ FROM PROJECTION TO INTEGRATION:
    NEGOTIATING NEW MEANINGS

Projections are not as easily corrected as simple misjudgments about
people might be. Rather, they can become deeply held, unconscious
patterns that are repeated and staunchly defended—as in Terry's case,
from her childhood family through her adolescent relationships to her
adult relationships. These qualities become exaggerated so that they
are dominant in the other, and vice versa. The psychic and commu-
nicative distance between people can be difficult to change. Imagine
how quickly Terry and James would distance themselves from each
other if they decided to part ways.

   However, building on Gordon's (1995) metaphoric notion of the
bridge, we can make an effort to explore our patterns and habits of
projection as they provide paths for insight into the relationship
between our inner and outer worlds and connectors between states of
a relationship that enable us to become more intelligent communica-
tors. The five following steps could be a useful set of dialogue topics
to help Terry and James decide what to do with their relationship.
Imagine that you are helping them to move beyond the crossroads at
which they find themselves. The stages and the related discussion
questions could form the basis of them negotiating a new meaning for
their relationship. Use the following main negotiation questions as a
framework for their discussion and imagine where they might go
from here:

Negotiation Framework for Dialogue

   How can each stage toward integration provide valuable insight
from Terry and James into

- the ideal relationship they desire and the constraints that those
  ideals create?
- the minimally acceptable level of relational quality and needed
  change that they would be happy with?
- the concessions that each of them might make in order to get
  closer to the other person's ideal level?
- the demands that each of them would want to make of the other
  in order for the relationship to work and be redefined?
- what conditions would indicate that the relationship will not
  work and therefore should end?

Von Frantz (1982, p. 9) provides us with five overlapping and progressive stages in the withdrawal of projections and the movement toward integration. These stages involve both (1) the recognition that you are implicated in the images of the other that you see in the other's communication and (2) that you are able to distinguish the person from the characteristics and motives as the person might see in themselves. This is the basis of perspective taking in conflict (Kellett & Dalton, 2001, pp. 62–64). As you examine the three stages of projection, imagine using the related discussion questions as a basis for a productive dialogue between Terry and James. Follow the principles of negotiation and dialogue as you explore possibilities for managing this conflict through the meaning of the projections at its core.

1. *Recognizing the archaic identity:* This occurs when the projector recognizes the identification of the other with the projected quality. The projector realizes that the constructed identity of the other may be faulty or archaic. For Terry and James, assume for the sake of this exercise that they are open to learning from this concept of projection and want their relationship to work but recognize that it might end. Try to imagine how they might both answer the following questions:

- What specific qualities or characteristics am I seeing in the other through how I tell my side of the story?
- Is this really what the person is like, or is there a possibility that I am seeing these things or reading these things into his or her words and actions from my viewpoint in the conflict?
- What are some important ways that my identification of the other might be faulty, limited, and limiting for our communication?

How might the insight from these questions provide valuable possible concessions and demands for both sides that help meet the needs of both Terry and James as they negotiate?

2. *Differentiation:* Differentiation occurs when the projector is able to identify the difference between the other person and the projected images of him or her. The difference between the other and the constructed image tells what is being projected. Building on the insight gained from the first stage, the projector is able to recognize that there are some important differences between the opponent in the conflict and how that opponent is being seen. It is important to question the characteristic and assumed motives of the other that the projector holds as true. Try to imagine how Terry and James might answer the following questions:

- What are the specific ways that the other is probably different from the qualities and characteristics I have been projecting onto him or her?
- How might that other person likewise be projecting his or her qualities and characteristics onto me?
- How are we both different from how we are constructing each other?
- What happened to that important difference in the dynamics of our conflict—why did I not see it?

How might the insight from these questions provide valuable possible concessions and demands for both sides that help meet the needs of both Terry and James as they negotiate?

3. *Moral evaluation:* This critical evaluation of the projection is based on the recognition that the projected image is not necessarily a manifestation of the person and that this projection has a moral and ethical component and implications for communication. Try to imagine how Terry and James might answer the following questions:

- How do my projections onto the other person result in moral and even unfair judgments of that person?
- How are these judgments based on qualities or characteristics of myself?
- How can I become more critically evaluative of how and what I project onto others?

How might the insight from these questions provide valuable possible concessions and demands from both sides that could help meet the needs of Terry and James as they negotiate?

4. *Illusion:* This stage is based on the recognition that the projection can be illusory images of others: We could be, and probably are, as wrong about them as they are about us. This is often the most difficult stage because it is very difficult to accept that the way we see people is an illusion of our own making. Even if we know it is a projected image, and we have morally evaluated it as such, we tend to hold onto our images of the other. This is partly because we do not like to accept that we are working on a false construction, and partly it is because in our own storying of the conflict, we piece together the evidence that proves that our perceptions are true—even if they are based on an illusion. It is quite difficult to change our projected image of the other because even though we know it is a projection, we still believe that the

evidence suggests that how we see the situation may be true, even as a projection of something about ourselves. It is very hard for us to accept that our version of an event could be wrong; we all tend to believe that we are right most of the time. Try to imagine how Terry and James might answer the following questions:

- In what ways are my assumptions about the other in this conflict based on an illusion?
- What do I still believe to be true about the other person, even though I recognize the illusory nature of my account?
- What would it take for me to give up these illusions and perhaps replace them with more accurate or fairer and balanced images?

How might the insight from these questions provide valuable possible concessions and demands for both sides that help meet the needs of both Terry and James as they negotiate?

5. *Reflection:* This final stage is based on asking how the image could have become so powerful in judging the other and on recognizing the ways that it structures and fuels the conflict. Try to imagine how Terry and James might answer the following questions:

- How do these judgments affect my communication with the other and, in particular, the style and direction of the conflict we are in together?
- How could the projected image of the other have become so powerful and true for me?
- What can I learn from the insight gained by challenging the projected images in my own account?
- How does my evaluation of projection in a conflict create points of connection and opposition that can be used as discussion topics that are the basis of a more productive dialogue process?
- What are some other projected images that have become powerful in my intimate relationships?

How might the insight from these questions provide valuable possible concessions and demands for both sides that help meet the needs of both Terry and James as they negotiate?

Of course, it is important to recognize that projections are rarely only from one direction. Conflicts can spiral off into arguments based on mutually negative and equally inaccurate projections from both sides. I think we have seen this to some degree in Terry and James's

conflict. Negotiations could easily devolve into name-calling and finger-pointing, matched by Terry imagining a new relationship with Patrick.

Once somebody projects an image onto you that you know to be false, the conflict naturally starts to focus on defending yourself from that projection and perhaps returning the tactic. It is also possible that you may find yourself the target of projections from the other person that you recognize as based on an inaccurate version of you. Learning how to help others recognize and work with their projections that they may be unconscious of is also a very considerable communicative challenge.

An important key to meeting this challenge is to approach the conflict as an opportunity to *find points of possible dialogue* that can take the participants to a deeper level of understanding. Terry and James are at the point where they are negotiating either an ending or a new beginning. Reexamine their story one last time for possible ways that they can question and move beyond their projections to a better understanding of each other. Assuming that you were working to mediate their conflict and got them to frame it as a reconciliation, try to reconstruct the conflict from that moment onward as they renegotiate the meaning of their relationship from one of disappointment to one of new beginnings. Recognize that it will not be easy and that a quick, happy ending is less likely than a lot of difficult argumentation as they strive for meaningful dialogue.

❖ LESSONS FROM THE FIELD OF PRACTICE:
   AN EXERCISE FOR EXPLORING PROJECTION IN CONFLICT

Working through the following exercise will challenge you to think about projection within your own field of practice—your everyday life.

Projection Exercise: Examining the Ideals and the Negatives You Bring to Relationships

Think of a time when you were in an intimate relationship with someone and found yourself or the other person using any of the following archetypal conversational scripts that suggest that projections are in action. Maybe they were used early on in a relationship and came back as issues when the relationship went through conflict. These are just a few examples; you may find other archetypal projections that are worth noting and discussing.

A Sample of Ideal and Negative Projection-Based Archetypes

- "You remind me so much of my [father, mother] in a good way." (An idealized quality is being projected which sets up false expectations.)
- "You are so different from my ex-[husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend], thank goodness." (The person is being compared in order to make up for the failures or incompatibility of the last partner.)
- "You seem to be perfect for me." (The person represents a cluster of idealized qualities. You may be perfect for them, or vice versa, but these need to be examined for their accuracy and reality with the actual person and for the underlying assumptions about what the inherently ambiguous term "perfect" means.)
- "Why can't I seem to do anything right for you?" (The other person is projecting personal feelings of inadequacy or imperfection onto you: "You should be perfect because I know I am not.")
- "Who were you with and what were you doing—are you cheating on me?" (If there is no realistic reason to be suspicious or jealous, then the person may be projecting personal guilt associated with actions or thoughts of a similar nature.)
- "I don't play games, but why do [men, women] always seem to be trying to play me?" (This is a projection of a negative quality onto a category of people, typically enabling denial of game playing on the part of the projector. This also sets up the justification for playing games as a defensive response to other people's games. "I am playing them before they can play me," is a typical pro-action.)

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think the particular archetype was used in your conflict?
- How did the archetype possibly relate to projection of an ideal or a negative quality by you and by the other person?
- What effect did the archetype and its related projection have on the relationship in setting up unrealistic expectations, relational pressures and tensions that resulted in conflicts, or creating negative depictions of you or the other person that resulted in competitive or conflicted communication, for example?
- How did the projections you have uncovered affect your relationship?

- What would you do differently to work with the projections if you could go back, and how would you do things differently in future relationships?
- What other archetypes have you come across in relational communication that seem to be connected to projections?

❖ CONCLUSION

Projection of both idealized and negative qualities seems to be a normal part of what people do in conflict. Projections are closely connected to our desire in competitive conflicts to portray the other as the villain and therefore ourselves as victim or hero. It is an issue of great concern when that normal habit crosses over into constructing the other as the enemy and makes it seem reasonable to use words as objects to throw as an attack.

Through this chapter, I hope you have seen how this phenomenon can close down dialogue, even create rancor, and yet at the same time also offer participants points of possible insight and even starting points for moving beyond negative projections toward more collaborative dialogue. It is possible to renegotiate the meaning of relationships based on exploring projections and how they impact those relationships.

If we have to engage in projection, perhaps we can all strive for ways to make divisive or violent conflict itself the villain of our stories that we are responsible for creating, so that the other can become a potential collaborator in managing the conflict. All of the divisive and collaborative processes discussed so far are based on our ability to use language in particular ways. Our interpretive and conflict management skills are also closely tied to our ability to see beneath and beyond the language of a conflict to problematize it and question and work from its meaning.