Projective identification in management education

Mark Stein

South Bank University, London, UK

Introduction

The application of psychoanalytic concepts has broadened significantly since they were first developed at the end of the last century. With their initial locus in the consulting room, psychoanalytic ideas have subsequently been applied to a range of disciplines from the arts to the social sciences. Following in the wake of Freud, the psychoanalytic school of Klein (1975a, 1975b), Bion (1961, 1977) and their followers has also given rise to a broad range of applications. Most relevant here are the substantial range of studies undertaken in the area of group and organisational psychology (Colman and Bexton, 1975; Colman and Geller, 1985; de Board, 1978; Hirschhorn and Barnett, 1993; Obholzer and Roberts, 1994; Stein, 1996; Trist and Murray, 1990). Despite this considerable literature, few studies (e.g. Salzberger-Wittenberg *et al.*, 1983) apply these ideas to education, and even fewer to management education in particular (e.g. French, 1997). The specific purpose of the present paper is to help to remedy this gap by examining the relevance of the Kleinian idea of projective identification to the area of management education. The paper begins with a discussion of the concept of projective identification. Following this two case examples from the author's own experience in management education are explored by way of illustration. Finally the implications for learning are examined.

Building on the basic psychoanalytic notion of projection (Freud, 1984), Melanie Klein (1975b) introduced the idea of projective identification in the following way. Certain aspects (experiences, feelings, qualities or attributes) may be unconsciously felt by the individual to be problematic. When these become too problematic, the individual may split them off and project into someone else. The subject thus expels these unwanted aspects from his mind by attributing them to others, thereby getting rid of them. Any awareness in the subject's mind that these aspects belong to him is therefore generally consigned to his unconscious; in his conscious mind, these are solely the property of the other person.

When we consider learning situations there are two major problems to note. First, as the subject is unaware that these aspects belong to him, he has no reason to address or deal with them in any way. Substantial projective identification thus precludes the possibility of a clear understanding of what belongs to the self and what does not, and this blurring of boundaries may in turn have major consequences for the capacity to learn because it remains unclear what properties belong to whom. Indeed, one key reason why projective

identification may be resorted to is that it provides the subject with relief from the obligation to scrutinise aspects of himself or his own life that may need addressing.

Second, although the subject is invariably unaware of the fact of the projection, frequently there are very concrete impacts on the recipient. The recipient may feel that something palpable and unwanted has been deposited with him or her against their will. One of the key implications for management educators concerns the importance of helping students develop the capacity to recognise these projections and find ways of dealing with them. Another is the importance of these management educators finding a way of dealing with some of the projections they themselves are on the receiving end of. These themes are explored in the two case examples that follow.

Case example 1
Description
This example concerns a student, Karen, who I taught during the mid-1990s when I was on the staff of a British University's Masters degree programme run in South East Asia. This involved me in three separate visits to the country, each about a week long, and also subsequent supervision from the UK. Following a brief but successful career as a health professional in various settings in and around the American subcontinent (from whence she came), Karen met and married a European diplomat. As her husband's work involved being on the staff of embassies in different countries at fairly short notice, the family would have to move from one country to the next every few years. Usually they had little warning and no choice about where they would land up, and had spent time in a wide variety of countries. This made it very difficult for Karen to continue her career as she had planned. Her career difficulties were added to by the requirement that she entertain her husband's colleagues and their partners and accompany her husband on social occasions, and by her caring responsibilities for their child.

About two years after their arrival in South East Asia Karen registered for a Masters course in Human Resource Development. Her principal aim was to find a course which would assist her in obtaining "fruitful, satisfying, long-term employment". The course included classes, seminars and action learning groups, and involved close contact with around 15 other students, some of whom were highly experienced and skilled in the field. She was very sensitive to the questions about her own career, especially when class-mates asked "What is it that you really do?", which she felt was probing her "Achilles heel".

When I taught the group, Karen was the only student to make significant although somewhat veiled criticisms of my teaching during a feedback session. There was another tutor who should have been invited out to teach, because the subject seemed to be "his thing", she said. Whether or not there was justification in her criticism of my teaching, her implication that I was not really teaching "my subject" was quite unfounded, as I had received my doctorate and published in this subject area. More peculiar was that neither she nor any of the

group had had any contact or met the tutor she referred to, and her only knowledge of him could have been from seeing his name on some of the course handouts.

Despite reasonable progress Karen's situation became rather complicated when she had to choose a site to undertake action research for her dissertation. On account of the disrupted nature of her career, she felt that the only realistic option was to try to secure agreement to undertake some work for her husband's employer, the Foreign Office, by doing some work at the embassy.

The Ambassador, her husband's immediate manager, initially agreed rather reluctantly to the idea of her undertaking action research, but it soon became clear that he had substantial misgivings about it. The action research became increasingly complicated, with disputes occurring about the way the data was collected; whether it would be appropriate to discuss various matters directly with the staff; and how the feedback would be given. The Ambassador accused Karen of being in breach of confidence, while Karen accused him of trying to sabotage the research. She became infuriated when he did not comply with all her requests, and was also clearly convinced that he was not competent to do his job. At one point she considered suggesting that certain management training sessions would help the Ambassador remedy the deficiencies in his work, but eventually decided against proposing this to him.

Shortly after beginning the research Karen and her husband were told that the embassy was to be inspected by the Foreign Office. A little after this they were abruptly told that there would be a restructuring: her husband's job was to be "downsized" and he would be moving shortly to an embassy in another country. Karen was deeply shocked by this, and was particularly concerned about the detrimental effect the move would have on her family. During one of her feedback meetings with the staff of the embassy, and in the presence of the Ambassador, she openly called the downsizing decision into question.

When Karen submitted her dissertation her local supervisor and I were struck by her almost total avoidance of the complex issue between her husband's work and her action research. Indeed, the fact of her husband's employment at the embassy was only mentioned in passing over half-way into the dissertation. We therefore referred her dissertation for further work, suggesting that she call me at a particular time for guidance and information. Feeling that I wanted to make it as easy as possible for Karen to contact me, I provided her with my work and my home telephone and fax numbers in London; it was standard practice among dissertation supervisors to do so.

Karen did not phone, but sent a fax on my home number. However, some time after midnight that night the phone rang, waking the whole family. Anxiously picking up the telephone, my wife heard Karen say she wanted to speak to me, and asking what the time was in London. When my wife told her it was 12.30 a.m., Karen burst into tears and hung up. I found it extremely difficult to get back to sleep that night, wondering what sort of state Karen was in, whether she would call back, etc. As Karen and her husband were quite used to making phone calls to Europe, there could be little doubt that she could easily have

worked out that it was very late in London. Most of all I felt that my home and family life had been invaded and intruded upon, and worried that this may be something we would have to deal with for some time. I also felt concerned that this affected my wife, because this really should have had nothing to do with her.

Bleary eyed, I found myself unable to put the issue out of my mind when I got up and began to get ready for the day that next morning. Around 8.30 a.m., the phone rang again. My wife took it and, once again, it was Karen. She made no mention of the call in the middle of the night, but simply wanted to know what our home fax number was. My wife said she would call me to give it to her, but by the time I got to the phone Karen had hung up. Once again I felt intruded upon, almost now claustrophobic with the worry that Karen seemed unable to stop herself from using the telephone to invade our home. It seemed especially odd because she put down the phone before I could give her the fax number, and because she must have known my fax number anyway as she had used it the previous day.

Analysis and discussion
Using psychoanalytic insights we may understand the above situation in the following way. One key aspect of Karen's personal struggle was the impact of her husband's job on her career and home life. Her husband's employer, the Foreign Office, determined, for example, which country they would live in, how long they would stay, and which apartment they would live in. The job also ensured that Karen was never entirely able to be away from her husband's work on a day-to-day level, so that their home was not entirely a "private space". A psychoanalytic approach would suggest we understand this situation in the following way: the permeability of the boundary (Miller and Rice, 1967) between her husband's job, and the resulting intrusion into her home life, was something Karen found virtually impossible to deal with. This permeable boundary had been a major factor in preventing her developing her own career identity, something she felt was her "Achilles heel". The enormity of the problem was so great that it became too painful to keep the issue in her conscious mind. However, its powerful presence in her unconscious mind drove her to expel the problem into me in a concrete way by making inappropriate phone calls which intruded into my family life: it was I who then had the problem of the ambiguous work/home boundary. Although she may have been upset to know she made intrusions into my life, the main function of the projection was to gain some respite by getting rid of the problem into me.

Another factor that bears consideration is the confusion of her position in relation to her husband and his work, and the intrusiveness that resulted. The evidence suggests that Karen's confusion led her to forsake her own role and unconsciously assume the role of her husband in acting as an employee of the Foreign Office, with all the expectations of an employee. The extent to which she had psychologically taken on this role is evident when we consider the powerful demands she made of the Ambassador, her expectations about the

sort of access she felt was her due, and her outrage when he would not do what she expected of him. In essence, this would suggest that Karen had been unable to bear the pain of being what she actually was: a student who was principally in a learning rather than a teaching role, and a diplomat's wife trying against the odds to secure a piece of action research in her husband's work environment. The solution was effectively to assume the professional identity of her husband, who was a long-standing employee with the Foreign Office. It was also clear that her identification with her husband and his role was largely unconscious, with Karen having little idea of the inappropriateness of her expectations concerning her actual role within the embassy. That her husband's employment at the embassy was barely mentioned in her thesis, and even then only appeared half-way through the text, provides further data that she unconsciously assumed she was employed there rather than him. In this sense she could remove herself from the role of student and wife, from being someone who currently had no area of special interest or expertise. The lack of area of an interest was lodged in myself, who was not really teaching his subject, and the lack of expertise lodged in the Ambassador, who was seen to be incompetent.

Case example 2
Description
The second example also concerns management education but this time is taken from a one week experiential working conference held in the UK. The aim of this residential working conference was to help managers and consultants develop their understanding and skill in dealing with some of the complex inter-personal and group issues that may emerge in their work roles. The entire working conference consisted of a variety of experiential group events modelled on the Tavistock Institute's conference "Authority, leadership and organization", otherwise known as the "Leicester conference" (Gould *et al.*, 1999, forthcoming; Miller, 1990a, 1990b), and was facilitated by consultant staff trained in this method.

One of these events, the small group event, occupies the main focus here. There were three small groups run separately and simultaneously, each of which had the task of studying the processes within the group as they occur. In other words, their sole task was to understand its processes in the "here and now". They met for six one-and-half hour sessions over the duration of the week. I will focus on the small group to which I acted as consultant, which consisted of ten members.

Over the course of the week two powerful themes emerged in the small group. One of these concerned the issue of death, and the feelings and responses people have in relation to death: this theme was shaped by the news of the horrific car accident which had killed Princess Diana on the day prior to the start of the conference. The conference ended the day prior to Diana's funeral in London. During that week, and for some time after it, the entire country seemed to be consumed by the tragedy, with rumours and media interest focusing principally on who may be implicated in her untimely death. As the paymasters

of the paparazzi it was even suggested that the general public were implicated, because they fuelled the paparazzi's desire to hound Diana, which ultimately may have led to the terrible accident.

The news about Princess Diana triggered off a great deal of sadness in the small group. Not only was her death spoken about in a variety of ways over the week, but it also evoked much discussion among the members about bereavements that they themselves had experienced. There were some very difficult moments, including one in which a member was so distressed that she had to leave the room, returning a little calmer a short while later.

The second main theme that emerged concerns the question of national, religious and ethnic identity. The issues raised included whether it felt possible to bring one's identity without fear of persecution into a range of settings that we encounter as people: at school, work, social events. Several members spoke about being bullied at school because they had foreign accents, foreign religions, or were different in some way. I made several interpretations which suggested that these issues may be present in the group as well, insofar as members may feel unsure as to whether they can speak of aspects of themselves and their identity without fearing attack or persecution.

The sixth and final session began by several members noting that this was the last session, and then moved on to considering what everyone would be doing the following day, the day of Princess Diana's funeral. Shortly after this one member, John, let it be known that he had a secret which was occupying his mind. Someone from one of the other small groups, whom he knew quite well from a previous course, had confided that his father had been a Nazi during the war. John found this terrible, especially as he himself was Jewish and knew well the history of the war. Immediately Sharon, another Jewish group member, proclaimed loudly that she felt so angry she would have struck this person had he told her. She went on to relate how many of her friends had lost family at the hands of the Nazis. The third Jewish member of the group, Marion, who had also been on the earlier course with John and the person who had revealed the secret, added that she too had been let into the secret by the person concerned. He said he had wanted to tell Marion something important, and asked whether they could go for a walk together. Marion thought he had felt ashamed of his father and was relieved to get the matter out into the open. She herself felt rather taken aback on hearing his secret and did not know what to say.

A lengthy conversation about the persecution of the Jews and the Nazi atrocities then occurred between the three Jewish members of the group. I made a few comments which attempted to bring the focus back on to the task of the group event by relating these issues to what was happening in the group at the time. The other members, however, were almost entirely silent for a substantial period of time.

Steve, a Christian vicar who had been silent for a long time, then commented that he felt as though he was a spectator at a tennis match watching the ball going from one side to another between the three Jewish members of the group, with myself as umpire between them. John then looked directly at Steve and,

with a somewhat accusing tone, reminded him that it was the spectators of the holocaust who colluded with the Nazis and their atrocities. Attempting to clarify the situation, Steve replied that he just felt completely left out of the conversation. Marion then turned to Steve and suggested that as a priest he may be worried about the collusive role the Christian church had played in the holocaust. Steve answered by saying that this was not what was on his mind; he only felt that he and others had not been let into the conversation and were being forced to spectate. He added that he now felt he had been accused of colluding with the holocaust by the Jewish members of the group, and that he was shocked and upset by this.

There followed a series of conversations about a variety of issues. The history of the war and the fate of the Jews was returned to several times, but the issue between Steve and the Jewish members was not mentioned. Towards the end of the session I noticed that, for some minutes, Steve had closed his eyes and held his face in his hands. No one commented on Steve's demeanour and no one tried to draw him into the conversation. I then commented on this. In response, Steve said that he felt he had been lumbered by the group with being a collaborator with the Nazis and that he felt he could not cope with this. As he had no sympathy with the Nazi cause, and indeed had been born after the war, he found this all very strange and difficult. However, in a review group at the end of the conference, Steve was able to talk about and reflect on all of this, and said that he felt some relief in being able to do so.

Analysis and discussion
The two themes of death and of identity were powerfully present in the group in various ways over time. The admission by one of the conference members that his father had been a Nazi brought the two themes together in a most potent way. His attempt to find an appropriate way to tell people about this, and the shame he evidently felt, did not diminish the power of the group's reaction: by proxy he himself was seen to be responsible for the crimes of the Nazis, and – in the view of one member – thereby deserved to be hit.

What followed in the group was that something palpable and quite awful was lodged in Steve by the three Jewish members. Without entirely being aware of what they were doing, they created a situation in which Steve was made to feel that he himself had colluded in the holocaust. Once again the issue of responsibility was dealt with by proxy: from the father, to the son (in the other small group), to Steve (in this group). This was quite remarkable because there was nothing that Steve did that connected him with the Nazis or that would suggest he may have sympathy with their cause in any way.

If these are examples of the by proxy transferring of blame from one person to another, the question remains why this should have occurred. One way to understand this is to suggest that there were two forces acting on the group at the time. One was the considerable anxiety that this was the end of the conference and that members may leave with substantial unresolved feelings. The other was a great deal of worry about the question of the responsibility one

may have for damaging other people in some way, a theme that had been present throughout the conference. This worry was made no easier by the fact this entire issue was fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty: just as there were many people implicated but no one uniquely responsible for the death of Diana, so in the group there was much uncertainty about the roles people had played, and the extent to which they may have helped, or alternatively, damaged, each other. What seems to have occurred is that, in the context of their worry about the end of the conference, the group transformed these painful uncertainties into something clear cut and unambiguous by re-evoking the Nazi-Jewish conflict. Whatever discomfort may have been created by the re-evoking of the race issue, it succeeded in drawing clear lines of conflict by lodging specific blame somewhere. This process of projective identification may have been made easier by the fact that the Jewish members knew the consultant, myself, to be Jewish, and may have assumed that I would not in any way undermine what they were doing. But it would be wrong to assume that the process was undertaken on behalf of the Jewish members alone: neither Jewish nor non-Jewish members of the group tried to redress the situation with Steve, and this suggests that the entire group needed to project blame into someone. Members of the group could then go their separate ways with a diminished memory of the pain of the ambiguity of their roles and responsibilities in the conference and elsewhere.

Implications for learning and conclusion
The central tenet of this paper is to suggest that an insight into projective identification may play a crucial role in helping us to understand the processes that complicate both management education and our experiences of organisations it is intended to illuminate. One could suggest three levels at which we may develop insights about these phenomena. First, learning includes becoming aware of one's projections and thereby being able to take responsibility for them. At the risk of giving too concrete a formulation for the problem, this involves an effective withdrawal of the projections from its recipients. In Karen's case, much of the work following her referral consisted of helping her to understand and take some ownership of the boundary problem that had so dramatically shaped her adult life. Within the limits of her complex situation, my ambition as educator would be to try to help her to find a role that was meaningful and unique to her. In the case of the working conference, one of my tasks in the last session was to highlight to the group how their worry about their own responsibility was projected quite forcefully into Steve. As the power of the projection only became clear at the very end of the conference, and indeed was fuelled by the process of ending, there was limited time in which members were able to become aware of and own their projections.

Second is an awareness of what happens to the recipient of the projection. It is important for both parties to be aware of the extent to which the recipient may feel intruded upon, controlled, or left with feelings which are not of their own making. Having felt somewhat invaded and incapacitated by Karen's

intrusiveness, my understanding of the process helped me to get some perspective on it, to re-establish boundaries, and to recover my capacity to supervise. Similarly, if the small group could understand and in some way withdraw the projections they had lodged in Steve, they would be able to continue effective work with him.

Third is an acceptance of the on-going work we all have to do in relation to this problem. Projective identification can never be "eliminated", and no amount of training can deal with the problem entirely. The best we can do is to try to find opportunities to learn from experience (Gould *et al.*, 1999, forthcoming), and to maintain a sober awareness of our inclination, as individuals or in groups, to engage in this kind of activity. We may thereby be able to become better teachers and students in the area of management studies.

References

Bion, W.R. (1961), *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers*, Tavistock, London.

Bion, W.R. (1977), *Seven Servants*, Jason Aronson, Inc., New York, NY.

Colman, A.D. and Bexton, W.H. (Eds) (1975), *Group Relations Reader 1*, A.K. Rice Institute, Washington, DC.

Colman, A.D. and Geller, M.H. (Eds) (1985), *Group Relations Reader 2*, A.K. Rice Institute, Washington, DC.

De Board, R. (1978), *The Psychoanalysis of Organisations*, Tavistock, London.

French, R. (1997), "The teacher as container of anxiety: psychoanalysis and the role of the teacher", *Journal of Management Education*, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 483-93.

Freud, S. (1984), *Vol. 11. On Metapsychology. The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.

Gould, L.J., Stapley, L.F. and Stein, M. (1999, forthcoming), *Applied Experiential Learning: The Group Relations Training Approach*, International Universities Press, Madison, NY.

Hirschhorn, L. and Barnett, C.K. (Eds) (1993), *The Psychodynamics of Organizations*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA.

Klein, M. (1975a), *Love Guilt and Reparation and Other Works*, The Hogarth Press Ltd and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London.

Klein, M. (1975b), *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works*, The Hogarth Press Ltd and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London.

Miller, E.J. (1990a), "Experiential learning in groups 1: the development of the Leicester model", in Trist, E. and Murray, H. (Eds), *The Social Engagement of Social Science, Volume I*, Free Association Books, London, pp. 165-85.

Miller, E.J. (1990b), "Experiential learning in groups 2: recent developments in dissemination and application", in Trist, E. and Murray, H. (Eds), *The Social Engagement of Social Science, Volume I*, Free Association Books, London, pp. 186-98.

Miller, E.J. and Rice, A.K. (1967), *Systems of Organisation*, Tavistock, London.

Obholzer, A. and Roberts, V.Z. (1994), *The Unconscious at Work: Individual and Organisational Stress in the Human Services*, Routledge, London.

Salzberger-Wittenberg, I., Henry, G. and Osborne, E. (1983), *The Emotional Experience of Learning and Teaching*, Routledge, London.

Stein, M. (1996), "Unconscious phenomena in work groups", in West, M.A. (Ed.), *Handbook of Work Group Psychology*, Wiley, Chichester, pp. 143-58.

Trist, E. and Murray, H. (Eds), (1990), *The Social Engagement of Social Science, Volume I*, Free Association Books, London.