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Discussion on Projective Identification – Transcript

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Panel members

John Steiner
Elizabeth Spillius
Edna O’Shaughnessy
Ignes Sodre

Contributors from the audience

Ron Britton
David Bell
Phil Crockatt
Catalina Bronstein
David Taylor
Cyril Couve
Kate Barrows
Robin Anderson
Michael Mercer
David Simpson
Malka Hirsch-Napchan
Giovanna di Ceglie
Deborah Steiner
Sally Weintrobe

JOHN STEINER

Tonight we’re really partly celebrating the book that Red [Edna O’Shaughnessy] and Liz [Elizabeth Spillius] have brought out. It’s a considerable achievement and I think it’s unusual that it’s actually well worth reading [*laughter*], it’s an assembly of papers. I think that this is such an interesting topic, and it’s so complex and difficult, but we’re all hoping that discussing it tonight we’ll all come away a little bit clearer. And, I think we’re all aware of the importance of the concept, but we want to get our minds round it in a more complete way. So we’re just going to have a very simple introduction from Liz, followed by another one equally short, from Red, and then the meeting’s open to the floor. And then Ignés [Sodre] and Ron [Britton], who have both written in a very original way about projective identification, will take part in the discussion. I’ll ask Liz to begin.

ELIZABETH SPILLIUS

Thanks John. I think, my reaction to this concept, especially at the beginning, was, “what an odd concept” – that you had two completely contrasting ideas, or so they seemed to me; because ‘projective’ implies difference, even contradiction, certainly movement, and identification implies likeness, similarity. And what was she going to do with this? This was many years ago and I was reading it for the first time. And it’s not surprising I think that this was a relatively



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late idea in Klein's writing, and it came with 'Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms,' a paranoid-schizoid position. If you're interested in it, you'll find a really good description of projective identification (Proj-Id to Red and me) in 1959 in 'Our Adult World and Its Roots in Infancy,' where Klein gives a nice, simple, clear presentation – I think she was going to speak at Napsbury Hospital or something like that, so that it's easier to understand and simpler. She writes, it seems to me, as if there are two objects, two people, and things are going on between these two, and she soon says that it's not only bad things that are projected, she wants to correct that right away; that good things are also projected. At one point she implies that good things may be projected because the individual feels that he doesn't deserve to have bad things. But then she broadens it out a bit, and she said, and indeed this fitted with my feeling, which was that there was something much more fundamental than that about it, and that was curiosity. She doesn't use that word, but it certainly I think comes into it. If I were involved in such an exchange, I thought, I would want to know, who and what is this other, who is both different from me but also, at the same time, the same as me? And could I have their good things? And could I put up with their bad things? And are we really so different, or are we basically similar, basically the same? And this is linked with Ron's idea, the distinction between attributive and acquisitive projective identification, because certainly in the clinical material you do occasionally come up against a person who is not so much getting rid of things from himself, but very keen on getting hold of the things the other person has; so acquisition is quite important.

How does one think about these things? In my experience you just hope for the best, and try and make sense of what is going on between you and your patient, and keep the idea in the back of your mind, not the foreground. There is another remarkable thing about this concept, and I still don't really understand it; which is the speed with which the idea has spread, and the number of places that it has spread to, and so quickly. My first experience of this was in 2002, which by Proj-Id standards is perhaps a little late, anyway, which was a meeting of the European Psychoanalytic Federation, and there were papers given by Helmut Hinz from Germany, Jorge Canestri from Italy (he also talked quite extensively about Spain), and Jean-Michel Quinodoz about the French-speaking people in Europe, but in the end he talks (in a rather nice paper in the book) about French attitudes, wherever French is spoken, to this particular concept. And the idea has also spread to North America, South America, Australia, New Zealand, even parts of China, and Japan. Why is a mystery to me. Is it so very useful or is it just because it is fashionable for a while? I've never quite understood it. But anyway, one can say it's a sort of infectious concept; if the next-door-neighbour's got it one has to have it oneself. So that's my introduction.

JOHN STEINER

We'll have some things to say about it I'm sure, and we'll want to ask Liz questions, but shall I ask Red to say her piece?



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EDNA O'SHAUGHNESSY

Well, I just want to continue on with the two things that Liz is talking about; the apparent contrariness within the concept of projective identification itself, on the one hand, and the unusual speed with which the concept has spread through the analytic world. In regard to the 'contrariness' of the concept, there is also another curious fact, that Klein introduced it in terms of schizoid mechanisms and, after her, the most notable contributor was of course Bion, who introduced it about something quite opposite: fundamental contact. There have been also many other facets to the concept, and I found myself thinking that Wittgenstein has said something very interesting, and I think a propos about concepts. For instance, he said in regard to the concept of thinking: "it is not to be expected of this word that it should have a unified employment, rather we should expect the opposite." And this was part of his general philosophy of language, that we should stop imagining concepts have essences, and realise rather that it's more a question of what he called 'family resemblances.' And it seems to me that it is really true of the concept of projective identification that there's a whole bunch, not of essences that you could pick out – ah! It's in this and that and that – because it isn't like that, but of family resemblances.

I also have a thought (I don't know if it's the right one) about the speed with which the concept has been taken up. And I wonder whether it has something to do with the fact that, though the phenomenon didn't have a name, the phenomenon itself has been existent between human beings forever and a day; that it's known, say, that one person has an effect upon another, and it's also known – we've only got to think about literature and poetry – that people make arrangements about carrying bits each for the other. I mean, in psychoanalysis, it did have its forerunners of course. There was Freud and what he said about Michelangelo, and more generally what Freud emphasised, ie that one unconscious can speak directly to another unconscious. Anna Freud had this very interesting example of the identification with the aggressor, and the term itself was in the air at the time that Melanie Klein introduced it, which Liz notes in the book's introduction. In our society, Marjorie Brierley used the term 'projective identification,' though she didn't follow it through. And then Klein named it, and she moved it to the centre of the Kleinian psychic stage, in that she linked it with anxiety, drives, defences, in 'Notes on Schizoid Mechanisms'. And I wonder whether the fact that it is so central and really ordinary a phenomenon in life, not just in psychoanalysis, that, although it had no name before, this is one of the reasons it has been so rapidly taken over. I was even thinking, we have a nursery rhyme: 'Jack Sprat could eat no fat/ And his wife could eat no lean,/ Between them both they licked the platter clean.' [*laughter from audience*] I was thinking of Liz and me, we probably had our divisions when we did the editorial work, each knowing well what the other would or would not carry.

JOHN STEINER

Well I think we should just open it up and see what lines you'd like to take up, and how you'd like to use the evening.



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[long pause]

I suppose, while you're getting over your shyness, I'll show how little shy I am. Because I'm struck by the complexity of the concept, but I do think it is a unified concept; I think it needs to be elaborated in some detail, and I think of it – I was struck by Red's use of this idea of family of meanings – but I think of it as a geography, a geographical space where things happen between people, and if we want to understand it we've got to be willing to describe the complexities. And, you can immediately see how complex it is, because there are multiple identifications, and I always think they are beautifully described by Freud in his paper on Leonardo da Vinci, where Freud says that Leonardo identified with his mother, and took as his object himself. So in our parlance we would say he projected a child self in his pupils, and that was projective identification, disowning the self and attributing it to the pupil. But that's not the only thing that happened, the other thing was that he acquisitively identified with his mother, and one question I'd like to ask the panel: what about *introjective* identification? If you take in an image of a mother – is that introjective? Or do you project yourself into the mother and acquisitively grab that identity? But whatever it is you've got a self identified with the mother, but another part of the self disowned, and I think that clearly requires splitting – you can't have projective identification without splitting. If you realise that at the same time the object is conducting a similar exercise – splitting and identifying – you can just imagine how complex the situation is, and many of us have been interested in the way that the analyst uses projective identification for their own defences, and how the patient all the time feels projected into. So that's all I wanted to say, I just think that there are things that we can get our mind around, but it's very complex, and each individual situation, clinically, has to be described; you can't just say, "I noticed projective identification was going on", that's a bit like saying, "I noticed breathing was going on" You have to actually describe it. Henri Rey used to have this statement, he would say, "You've got to ask yourself: what part of the self, with what motives, reacts to what part of the object, with what motives and with what consequences?" And I think something like that's required; what part of the self in identification with what object is relating to whom, distorted by what projection? And that requires an individual answer, but I'm just putting that forward in the hope that it will raise different questions from the audience.

ELIZABETH SPILLIUS

Incidentally, Klein always called it "my splitting paper". She didn't call it "my projective identification paper".

JOHN STEINER

Is that David Bell?

DAVID BELL

Yes. I just want to take a bit further what's been said in the introductory comments, because it's a concept that I feel very split about. That is, when I teach it, I try my best to make the strong claim that projective identification is an



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internal event, it's not an interpersonal event, that is, that one can't map a psychic mechanism onto an interpersonal situation, that they are different kinds of thing. So I try to imagine the situation, for example, where someone feels left out and alone, and they're on their own in their room, and then they imagine themselves very superior to someone else, and imagine that person watching them, and feeling left out and alone. And then of course they feel better; they've not met anyone. They've, if you like, become acquisitively identified with one object, and projected something into another. But then they might go and meet someone, and act upon them in such a way as to make that internal rearrangement of things have an instantiation in reality; for instance by meeting someone, and making them feel very envious of them. So, that's the two-stage version of the concept, the first being projective identification, all occurring internally and in fantasy, with consequences, how the person feels, and the latter being its actualisation, so that's following Joe Sandler's and Michael Feldman's model. And I think the reason I do that is because so often I hear people say, "Well it can't have been projective identification because I wasn't affected," as if the barometer is how the other person feels, and not on the understanding of what's going on with the person. That being said, I'm never completely convinced by my own argument, because I'm also persuaded that there is this direct unconscious contact which seems to me to be a different kind of concept to the first one. But I suppose what I'm saying is that it seems conceptually difficult – perhaps part of the problem is there being no essence, of it being part of a family – to map an internal defensive procedure, to look for its evidential basis in a real external person.

JOHN STEINER

Now, anyone on the panel may want to respond...

RON BRITTON

Now I think what I'm going to say may connect a bit with what David's just said, because after all the concept as described by Klein from her paper, was at a time when she was particularly being informed by, I think, by her analysis of Herbert Rosenfeld, from whom she must have been hearing about his schizophrenic patients a great deal. And I think it was in that context, and therefore at that point it was a psychotic phenomenon that was being addressed. Like most psychoanalytic explanatory concepts, they start out as psychopathology and turn out to be normal. What I mean is that it's like medicine, in other words the abnormal leads the way to seeing normal states and mechanisms, as with the Oedipus complex, as with the depressive position, and as with projective identification. But it's one of those concepts I think, that is really valid because it has arisen – knowledge of it, that is – has arisen really out of psychoanalytic experience. It hasn't come from outside and been grafted in, it's really from the practice. And it's very early – I think I'm taking over from Red here – it's very early, because, if you take Klein for instance, her Berlin child cases are absolutely full of examples of projective identification, which she is analysing without naming it. But the Erna case, for instance, is absolutely riddled with it – which we would now say is projective identification – but doesn't use the name. And the best example of all is in Freud, and I'm going to read a



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short extract from a paper of Freud's which I didn't find until after I thought I'd introduced a new idea, and then discovered of course, as with Freud's famous footnotes, that he'd described it exactly. And this was the idea of acquisitive projective identification, my term, with one or other of the parental couple in the primal scene; and that's what this paper is about. It's called 'A Case of Paranoia Running Counter to the Psychoanalytic Theory of the Disease'. He wrote it just after he wrote 'Mourning and Melancholia' so it's about 1915. I'll just describe very briefly a bit out of the paper, and I think you'll see what I mean. It was an analytic case, it was a case he was consulting about, because there was a young woman and she wanted to sue someone, and her lawyer brought her to Freud to test out the validity of what she was saying. The young woman claimed that a man had abused her by getting unseen witnesses to photograph them while they were making love, and that this now gave him power to bring disgrace on her. So that was the young woman who was brought. A very attractive young woman, thirty, an only child, still lived with mother, father had died years ago, and a man at the office, her office, who she couldn't marry – Freud's very discreet about why, we imagine it's because he is married – but who persuaded her to his rooms in the day time. And I'm now quoting Freud (I can't do better!): "They kissed, embraced, as they lay side by side, and he began to admire the charms as they were now partly revealed to him. In the midst of this idyllic scene however, she was frightened by a noise, a kind of click or a knock, and she was reassured by the chap that it was a clock. However, we don't know what happens then, but we then hear that when she was leaving she sees two strangers, to her, on the stairs, and one of them has a small box wrapped up, and she develops the idea as she walks away, that this could have been a camera, and there could have been a man hidden behind the curtain, taking a photograph. So she starts a campaign to complain to the lover, or would-be lover." Well Freud then talks about his explanation, and that's what I really wanted to draw our attention to – at first he points out that this paranoia of the woman does not conform to the pre-existing psychoanalytic idea, the current idea, that it's based on homosexuality, as a basis, and points out that this is in a heterosexual context. And he adds (this is Freud): "Among the store of unconscious fantasies of all neurotics and probably all human beings there is one, of watching the sexual intercourse of parents. This is a primal fantasy." He then goes on to fully elaborate, and says, "It's clear that for this woman the patient's lover was her father, but she had taken her mother's place; and the listener and watcher was a third party, which had originally been herself. And instead of choosing her mother as a love object, she identified with her: she became her mother." Well, what more can you say? Tucked away in that paper – and it's fascinating, all it needs is the name. And Freud quite often, I think, uses the concept in his work, comes across it here and there, very clearly.

JOHN STEINER

Thank you.

EDNA O'SHAUGHNESSY

Fascinating.



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JOHN STEINER

OK. Yes, Phil, Phil Crockatt.

PHIL CROCKATT

What Ron has just described, the passage from Freud, chimed in with something I was thinking in relation to the earlier points, about why this concept is so infectious. And, it seems to me that one thing that Ron's description brings alive is another of Klein's great discoveries, which is the internal world of object relationships, which it seems to me in that passage of Freud we get a very vivid sense of – plus the idea of identifications with different kind of objects. And if you think about her other paper, 'Transference: the total situation', you get a far richer version of the transference, which we've had a very good illustration of, and it seems to me that the concept of projective identification does provide the underpinning, the mental mechanism, which then explains this far more complex and rich version of the unconscious internal world of object relationships. The way this is following what Dave Bell was saying, actualised and enacted in the interaction with the analyst, and so it's interesting what Dave was saying about projective identification being an *internal* concept. I think it's quite complex, it does include, for me anyway, the enactment and the actualisation, and that presumably – I don't know what the panel would think about this – this is one of the reasons that it has become such a rich concept, because it really keys in with the emphasis on the transference, and a very rich version of the transference, and the recreation of the internal world compared with the very early concepts.

JOHN STEINER

Catalina?

CATALINA BRONSTEIN

Yes, thank you very much. I was following what Ron was saying and thinking that, obviously Freud had already introduced the notion of internal objects and also of identification – it's already there in 'Mourning and Melancholia'. I was still wondering specifically about the differences between acquisitive projective identification and identification. One question is what are the specific differences? We tend to use the notion of acquisitive projective identification. The other question which I think is a concept that Rosenfeld also explored in his notion of 'psychotic islands', which I think is a very helpful and useful concept, has to do with projective identification that happens within the same subject in relation to different parts of the body. He described how through splitting and projective identification phantasies can be felt to be lodged in a part of the body. And, I'm interested in this because I think it's perhaps useful to think what is the difference between this and the mechanisms that we can sometimes see in hysteria, how much we would think of using the notion of projective identification in relation to hysteria. Even though it is not the same, in relation to psychosomatics I think that Rosenfeld's example of psychotic islands is quite useful.



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JOHN STEINER

Let's just go on collecting thoughts and the panel will come in when they feel like it, ok?

EDNA O'SHAUGHNESSY

I was just thinking the notion of 'actualise' that Phil Crockatt mentioned, was of course Joseph Sandler's, in his most excellent paper, which we've got in this book. He asks, how can you take this concept without taking the whole Kleinian package? And he thinks you can, and he himself certainly did, I think, put it in another psychoanalytic perspective, which is something we paid attention to in our book.

JOHN STEINER

Dave Taylor?

DAVID TAYLOR

I thought that when Red referred to Wittgenstein, she was going to say – it's a quotation I always get wrong – "of that we cannot speak thereof we must be silent." Because it seems to me that one of the important aspects of projective identification is its nonverbal nature, and one could link that with the development that Bion introduced, which was to say in a more fundamental sense than had been said before in psychoanalysis, that human beings are social animals. Freud had obviously spoken about human beings as herd animals, but it seemed to me Bion was saying that we are fundamentally connected with each other, and – now I don't know if he explicitly says this, or it's just implicitly there and self-evident – is projective identification the means by which we are social animals? And the bond between us is fundamentally nonverbal. And then the question is, does that have to depend on something called phantasies, unconscious phantasies, or is it just what we do, just what we are, as it were, just our equipment? Then a further question I would like to say is: can the forms of projective identification that seem more solely intrapsychic, where the psychotic patient no longer bothers to check that the projection has been effected, they just have a bad object that exists about them, that watches them. Now, are those forms of projective identification, can they be largely explained – or, to what extent can they be accounted for on the basis of the breakdown of the normal communicational function, for which, as Bion said, you need an emitter and you need a receptor (you know, the baby needs a mother and the mother needs a baby)...? There hasn't, as maybe Dave Bell pointed out, there hasn't really been a resolution of the conception of unconscious fantasy that Hanna Segal used to say, look this is a fantasy, and the conception of projective identification, which regards it as a form of interpersonal communication.

EDNA O'SHAUGHNESSY

It surely is important to stress that this is nonverbal, without words. Didn't Freud think of consciousness as the organ for the perception of psychic qualities, and don't we see this going on, wordlessly, even between little babies and their



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mothers, that a baby will perceive without words the depression of a depressed mother? Later of course, this might get put into words, but that's all much later.

JOHN STEINER

Cyril Couve?

CYRIL COUVE

Just to pick up on what David and David said, the discussion of when is it a fantasy as compared to a communication with an Other; isn't it quite axiomatic in Kleinian metapsychology that, alongside the properties of the unconscious mind that Freud mapped out, that what is fundamental is cycles of introjection and projection? So there's never a phantasy which is not projected and then re-introjected in a certain form. And I wonder whether it is for Klein, whatever phantasy it is, it always goes out and is enacted or actualised in this way.

JOHN STEINER

It seems to me there are kind of two themes evolving; one is this issue of phantasy versus interaction, and I think that we might want to pursue that, and the other is, I thought, to do with the question of, sort of, verbal understanding versus nonverbal, and both of those seem to me interesting and connected. It would be nice to see how our thoughts develop about those.

ELIZABETH SPILLIUS

I find that particularly interesting, because I think, particularly after reading large chunks of the archive, that Klein was using this idea for a long time without knowing she was using it; it wasn't conceptualised in her thinking. And then, perhaps partly inspired by other people in the British Society, she began to find words for it. But she kept the contradictoriness of it, which I think was particularly valuable, because it's such an important part of it, and she kept also, in the way she used it, the feeling of its being often quite bottled in, not with words but then words would come in to crystallize what was happening. And this was a considerable accomplishment, because...of course, that was the way she thought, she did things for quite a long time before she tried to understand what she was doing.

RON BRITTON

I feel we're sort of going round the edge of something a bit in our responses, which is to do with the notion of projective identification as a psychopathology, which it undoubtedly is in some situations, and when it's normal. And for me, being very basic, clinically I think of three situations. One is of, if you like, psychopathological projective identification, such as the acquisitive kind I was talking about, or quoting Freud as talking about, or the attributive kind, in which some aspect of the self is got rid of and allocated to somebody else. But there's also normal projective identification. And I think there's another category, which is the absence of projective identification. And I think it gives a particular quality of unreality to the countertransference, which underlies the kind of cases that are sometimes called 'as if' cases and so on, in which the communication is never backed up with the usual invisible communication, so that the words may



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be there, the telling may be there, the narrative may be there, and one cannot get a sense of being impacted by it. And in some patients it's very striking; so I think there are three situations really.

ELIZABETH SPILLIUS

And the communication isn't quite there, often. It is not quite there.

KATE BARROWS

I have two points. One is a question: are we saying that almost all communication is projective identification of one kind or another, either for communicative purposes or psychopathological? Can we talk about communication that doesn't involve this, or are we saying that it's present in all our emotional communications? That's my question; I don't feel I have the answer to it. And the other thing is just a thought about the importance of the nonverbal arts in communicating through projective identification. I think music does this extremely powerfully, as do the visual arts, so that's another thought. That's all I had to say.

JOHN STEINER

Thank you very much.

IGNES SODRE

Can I just say something, two somethings? One is that we have this word which has become so important, and this concept which is so crucial and so on. But I think, to start with, it's not a very good word, it's a word we adopted, it's a term we adopted – two words together – and we know what we mean, and we know there are different forms of it, and there are different strengths of it, and different versions of it, but I don't think we actually believe that there's ever a process which involves just projection and not introjection. It's a very basic point, but I think it's important to remember that we baptised this concept 'projective identification,' although it's a mixture always. Even Ron's definition of attributive, acquisitive and so on, obviously comes with introjection, and it's terribly important not to think about it as just projection, even though we call it that. And the other thing that I wanted to say: there are various kinds of it, and Ron just gave his version of the various kinds, but there are two things that I think are rather fundamental, which are: how great it is, how powerful, how total, or how minor, the different sizes of the projective identification, how much actually takes over the object, or in fantasy takes over the object, and how much is sort of fleeting and part of everyday – I can only understand you if I for a moment step in your shoes and then step back in my shoes, and I know what it is to be you, and so on. These kinds of things that are changing roles, in very minor ways, but there is no way of having an object relationship if you're not doing that very fundamental thing of shifting places. And then you have the other extreme of it, I think we called it massive projective identification, in which it can become absolutely rigid, and can become a kind of character trait, and that person has become whatever it is, and then there's a very, very pathologically rigid identification with some internal logic, presumably. And you also have people who have sort of successive identifications, very quickly with different



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objects. I was rereading some of the archives in the book and I thought how Mrs Klein talks about a particular mix of particular interpretations which she says, in this story, Patient H was character A, character B, character C and character D, and she's talking about fragmentation. But some people also very much *are* like that; it's just their identifications are rapid and shallow and too quick, so you have a feeling that this person isn't anybody in particular because they are shifting. But also the form of identification in which one totally becomes the object really, as Cathy said, is first described in 'Mourning and Melancholia': you say, "I'm the worst person in the world", and in fact you mean the object, that's a massive projective identification. There's also Anna Freud and the identification with the aggressor, I think that was really the first description of projective identification, which again is about the self becoming completely the object and, for that period of time, believing himself to be the object, except he's not the object because he's himself. So I think the projective identification of becoming somebody else is very, very different from the ordinary taking a bit of the other role and coming back, and so on.

JOHN STEINER

Robin?

ROBIN ANDERSON

Yes, I, I was just thinking, in a way it's linked a bit to what Dave Bell was saying earlier, but – and, it's been taken up, but you know, this whole question of the, ...it seems sort of unthinkable, I would say, to most Kleinian analysts and an awful lot of other ones, not to be absolutely steeped in how the patient is affecting you. And I was thinking how Melanie Klein was very, very suspicious of this – and I think in some ways Hanna Segal was a bit actually, she did allow it, and feel she was influenced by it (I have a special means of knowing this [*laughter*]). But she was quite guarded about it. What I think is one of the things that is remarkable about this concept, is that it has, in its further development...and I was going to say that, my first supervisor was Betty Joseph, and right from the beginning, from the very first session I ever took to her, she was very interested in one's countertransference, and you had to really scrutinise that in relation to the material, and it wasn't that it wasn't extremely disciplined but there was a sort of anxiety about a kind of chaos, I think, that analysts were so guarded about, their own psychopathology, their own neurosis, the enormous danger you expose yourself to by being with a patient...and having to feel you've got to hold yourself together, and then you try and analyse the pathology, and there were all sorts of terrific developments that took place in that way. And somehow, what David Taylor was saying, that man is a social animal, and that projective identification may be one of the key means of communication, and indeed harm – it's another kind of war if you like – that takes place. So, it's massively important, and it gave us a language, and it's gradually given us more confidence to feel that we can talk about ourselves in a way that has to own all sorts of uncomfortable things that we know probably are about our own neurosis, and at the same time are mines of riches when it comes to trying to understand the patient, and I feel as though, the way that it's used now – and of course it's misused and that's one of the dangers – but that



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when it is used carefully, it's provided us, and it's second nature I think to most analysts, but it's provided us with a means of having a place to contain some of this dilemma which lies between, if you like, countertransference which means you need more analysis, and countertransference that's a means of working something through.

JOHN STEINER

Now we're getting a lot of hands at the same time. Michael?

MICHAEL MERCER

I thought it was very helpful that Liz began the discussion by drawing attention to the very particular nature of the concept; that it's not a single concept, that at its heart is a sort of dynamic, it is actually a process of a splitting, a movement, a to and a fro. And, I thought that Ignes' contribution really described for me some of the very core qualities of it, which are quite different, in a way, to the normal kind of psychoanalytic concept. I mean, normally we talk about fantasy and oedipal fantasy, or a fantasy of a persecuting object, but these are pictorial kinds of concepts that we use to structure relationships and internal psychic states. But, I thought what Ignes then described really was that this concept, because it is at its heart a dynamic one, introduces all kinds of different measures, you might say, into the sort of real life experience; that is, that you talk about the speed of projective identification, you talk about the quantity of it, you talk about the persistence or the temporariness of it; and in a way you could start using these concepts of measurement or quantitative measurements: is this a psychotic kind of projection? A communicative kind of projection? And I think these are all more sort of quantitative kinds of concepts, which sort of fill out, what Red was talking about this family, so to speak, that there are these different versions, and at the heart of these different versions are different quantitative aspects. And when we're in the clinical situation, of course, we are very responsive – or try to be responsive – to these quantitative aspects, and measure our own responses to these things. But I think the way it's so appealing, and the sense of the way the concept has caught on, is that it includes something that's not quite, although as Ron said it has been discovered by psychoanalysis, it uses different kinds of measures and different kinds of conceptual frameworks to fill out something which is essentially alive and dynamic.

JOHN STEINER

David?

DAVID SIMPSON

Thanks. I want to sort of contribute something to the question of how much the concept is, you could say, a normal process, and how much it's present in pathological states. And I suppose, coming to this, my thinking is rather informed by my interest in a particular sort of pathology, particularly in autism and autistic states, where there has always been a recognition of fundamental difficulty in making effective contact, empathic contact, with other people and other things, at quite profound levels. And I think that particular sort of



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understanding brings us into thinking about the concept from the point of view of Bion's idea of it being a primary process occurring between infant and mother, and mother and infant in mutual understanding. But I'm also struck by the fact that it's viewed as an omnipotent fantasy, it's based upon an omnipotent fantasy – well, the question then is, when is that omnipotent fantasy a normal process, and when is it abnormal? And are we always in the presence of omnipotent fantasy? Then I think it raises the question as to how much the idea of projective identification is only one facet of the use of fantasy and projective communication in the development of communicative processes; which I suppose raises the issue not so much, when is it abnormal and normal, but is it actually something that develops? There's a development to projective identification and there are normal trajectories to that, so that it can go up a normal path, or it may start going off in all sorts of abnormal ways, some of them quite fundamental such as in autism, and in others where, perhaps, we just are perhaps more returnable to, which we see in more normal states.

JOHN STEINER

Who is that in front of David? Oh, Malka.

MALKA HIRSCH-NAPCHAN

Just to take on from that, and to link with something that John, said before about Henri Rey saying about, with what purpose or what intention is the projection happening; and I was thinking also about what we heard about from Freud, and thoughts I have, and I would like the panel's opinion about that, I found Donald Meltzer's distinction between intrusive projective identification and projective identification very useful, which is more, according to him, Bion's contribution. And I think about the intrusive aspect of projective identification as something that perhaps helps us organize and orientate ourselves, in order to understand the impact of projective identification and its pathological aspect or more communicative developmental aspects. And I'd like the panel's opinion about that.

JOHN STEINER

Giovanna?

GIOVANNA DI CEGLIE

Yes, I would just like to add to the latest comment because even intrusive projective identification has got a communicative connotation, because it tells us something about the nature of the object into which projections occur. And I think that part of the difficulty in thinking about projective identification is that we tend to talk about it in terms of a mechanism or the mind of the patient, but can we actually find a way of talking about it in relation to the mind of the receptor? And I think that's when it gets so complicated because when we think, is it normal or pathological, are we right in thinking about that, rather than thinking in terms also of the mind of the receptor, whether there is a normal way of receiving, which I think is the work of Bion in a sense, where he actually thought that if there is a mind which can cope with the projection, there is a sense of transformation of the projection. So, even if the projection might be



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pathological, so to speak, it gets transformed in the mind of a so-called normal reception – so things get very complicated indeed!

JOHN STEINER

I'd like to go back to go back to something I was trying to say before about pathological and normal, because I think what psychoanalysis does is rather what medicine does in relation to physiology, rather than physiology in relation to medicine. What I mean by that is, a good deal of physiology is discovered through clinical states of abnormality in medicine, and that's really how psychoanalysis has grown, so it's a bit like – and we seem to be moving all the time – when is it normal? Because my feeling is that if we thought about it in terms of the time of Harvey, it's as if we discover heart failure, and as a consequence we then discover the circulation of the blood, and then we start to get interested in, well maybe it's necessary for the blood to circulate; and that's what we're saying, in a way. So, then there is this notion of this mechanism or (I prefer a less mechanical word really) process which can communicate, but we also tend to judge, do we not – taking your point – as to what is communicated, taking the countertransference. So we like to think, don't we, that it's a normal projective identification if what we get on the receiving end is something like horror, and if it's effectively mobilized; because I think communicative, effective projective identification, in some way or other, resonates with something in us on the receiving end, so we don't necessarily welcome these projections, and we may be inclined to think that the abnormality is because we don't like what's projected – if it's rage or if it's horror, or if it's something unpleasant, or nausea, which is a very unpleasant countertransference – but none the less occur. Is that normal projective identification? The mechanism is being used at that point, and this is what Bion would have thought was communicative projective identification, of projection of beta into alpha and so on. But of course it may involve the projection of what we would like to think of as rather abnormal mental states.

EDNA O'SHAUGHNESSY

Could I just add something to emphasize something that Ron was saying and what you were saying, about the receptor? Because it seems to me that, lately, there's been a bit of a new emphasis on, not only what projective identification puts into the receptor (I'm really thinking of us as the receptor, the analyst), but also what these projective identifications can pull out of us, and that many of our patients have got a very good eye for what's in there, and they want to get it out. And think this is a very important aspect that adds to our sense of vulnerability and exposure; these things that our patients pull out of us.

JOHN STEINER

I think the discussion has gone in a very interesting way, very important. I think Giovanna put it neatly in terms of the receptor, but I think it's the whole of Bion's discussion of containment. I don't think now that we can discuss projective identification almost as if the object was just a receptacle, so that the two *have* to be thought of together, and of course, if we think of projective identification as a means of understanding, of being understood, we've got to remember it can



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also be a means of misunderstanding, and the aim may be to be misunderstood, and yet there's a kind of meta-understanding: if the analyst can understand that, there's yet a further sense of the communication getting through. And I always think of Bion saying this patient was so boring that he was interesting, you know he was fascinated, and I think Ron's describing someone who *can't* use projective identification. I remember Ruth Riesenbergr stressing this, that she had a patient who would threaten to commit suicide but left her totally cold, she was completely indifferent, she thought, how can I be so indifferent, what's not getting through? But then there's a meta-level, there's something about a coldness that is being projected, and there's a mental state experienced by the analyst as a result, which perhaps could be understood if the wheels can be turned further. So that the question of whether it's understood or not depends on the receptor, not just on what's projected, and I think that makes it so complicated. Of course, the other way round is – Ignes was talking about putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, well that's the ideal way of misunderstanding someone, because you think, I've put myself in your position, and you will behave and experience what I do, but you're a different person; you know, the mother who hears a baby cry says, I *know* what's wrong with this baby –

IGNES SODRE

But that's not – sorry, that's not usually what you mean by, when you're listening to your patient you do understand through an identification which hopefully is not too projective –

JOHN STEINER

Ah, you may, but you may not.

IGNES SODRE

No, but you aim to, or that's what should be happening.

JOHN STEINER

Oh yes –

IGNES SODRE

It's not the same thing as you say, "I know how you feel, because I'm..." That's a completely different kind of statement.

JOHN STEINER

I'm afraid sometimes we do behave like that.

IGNES SODRE

Well, speak for yourself! [*laughter*] But what I was going to say seriously is that I think, because I remember Red, centuries ago, I remember it just being a complete revelation – I hope I'm not misquoting it – but I remember a discussion, really in the old institute, when I was sort of starting, and people were talking about the particular problem, was it being communicated or not, and what is a communication. And Red said, after several complicated things,



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“Well it’s a communication when you catch it.” I thought, this is brilliant, and very clear and common sense, but it is true. And you *don’t* catch it, because of the nature of the projection. You also *don’t* catch it, because of the nature of you, and the particular blind spots, and the particular psychopathological this or that. But again it’s in the moment to moment, so you may not be able to understand now, because it touches something, and you may be able to understand a bit later. But the other thing that I think is terribly important to always think about is, how much the projective identification is, how much it carries in terms of aggression, but also how much it’s completely driven by repetition compulsion, in which case it’s terribly hard not to get caught in it and enact it – and, as we know, you have to enact it, you have to be able to participate in that process and so on. But if there is a lot of the personality invested in this sort of stasis, I think it’s terribly difficult to disentangle yourself and find whatever the point you have to move away from, and these various meta matters you’re describing, that actually gives you a little bit of a grip on something else, because something also, that’s just the sort of thing that projects despair in the analyst, and makes the analyst therefore less receptive because more fearful of the grip of this thing. And from the patient’s point of view, the patient may experience because his life depends on that, you can’t just think about it as entirely malevolent, it can also be that if there’s a shift they will die, they will kill or they will disintegrate or something. But nevertheless I think it’s probably not so much, is it fear or terror or this or that, but this quality of something absolutely static that repeats and repeats; that’s very powerful.

DEBORAH STEINER

I was rather interested that you mentioned Bion saying something about a bore, a patient who was so boring, because I was actually thinking about bores and what is this mechanism? Because I was reminded of, not a patient, but a friend who [*laughter*] – perfectly nice friend – who, I remember one occasion where he was talking to me, really about very interesting things, history and architecture, and he was very knowledgeable, but it was terribly boring, and I couldn’t engage with it at all. And going through a whole sort of gamut of emotions, like, well maybe I’m just not getting it, I’m not listening properly, and then thinking, I’m a bit guilty because I’m not interested enough, and then getting quite irritated, feeling I was being pinned down by this boring kind of talk, that I wasn’t engaged with at all. And I was thinking was it something about this friend (who is a perfectly nice person) who seemed not to be engaged with me at all, not with me as a person, or what did I think about it; he seemed totally cut off and in his own world, and there was something, it reminded me of a sort of normal autism in a way, that at the same time as talking to people you’re kind of listening to what is actually coming back to you, in some rather vague way, you’re kind of tuning into what’s coming back to what you’re saying. And there was something of that that I thought was very interesting, about when Bion was talking about this bore, how interesting it is, and what it is that’s lacking.

JOHN STEINER

David Taylor?



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DAVID TAYLOR

Well, just, stimulated by Deb's comment, and I don't think I ever talked about history or architecture [*laughter*] – I'm sure I didn't. But linking that also with David Simpson's earlier point about how there are strange roots that start to take place, strange bifurcations in the manner in which individuals develop, and how they deal with what's inside them, and the different forms of projective identification. You were mentioning autism, which I don't know much about. But one is struck by this whole range of phenomena, like fetishism for instance, where a concrete object comes to have some terrific significance, and we often talk about something being projected into those things; or like some people who get very attached to inanimate objects, like stones, or particular kinds of object relations, where – I think we had a Klein Trust conference about them a few years back – where particular types of objects come to represent something of enormous significance, and it is somehow fixed in there, in seems crucial, as Ignes was perhaps saying. And, I don't know whether it's linked with that – in fact I don't think it is linked with that – but I was always struck with Leslie Sohn's notion of an indentificate, and that the difference between an identification, which seems to be a psychologically real process, and this other one, which is the formation of an indentificate, which seems more constructional; it seems as if there's more of some kind of very primitive ego effort to construct a self or to project oneself into...which may be a very big object or a social role – you see some people who have no personalities but are all social role. And those sorts of phenomena seem to me to be in that whole range of different developments of, out of this common core, with what do individuals do with what's inside them, how do they manage it?

EDNA O'SHAUGHNESSY

I'm glad you mentioned Sohn's notion of the indentificate, because I think it goes back to the question that I think got raised – what is the difference, and is it something very significant, between introjective identification and projective identification, and the sequelae that land up in the inner world? And I've always thought too that Sohn's notion of calling the result of projective identification an indentificate – especially when it takes over the mind and becomes such a dominant presence within – is a very good way of discriminating the two.

RON BRITTON

Because, since I've raised this notion of the acquisitive identification, I'm often asked what's the difference between that and introjection? And to me that's as simple as saying, how do you dress up? For me, acquisitive projective identification is getting inside something, so you actually are getting inside the clothes, and it's very often done in that way; you're getting inside and assuming the identity of the object – you're not taking it in, as it were. An extreme example of it, for instance, is the poet Rilke, who writes a novel, which is an autobiographical novel, of his terrifying childhood really. He used to have a dressing-up basket, and he used to assume characters and dress up in them, and then look in the mirror; and he was absolutely terrified on one particular day, which he describes terribly vividly, because he thought he'd ceased to exist; he thought that this character that he'd managed to assume, and could



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see in the mirror, existed, but he had ceased to exist. And of course that echoes a lot of his poetry, if you know his poetry, his great fear that if you fall in love you lose yourself because, as he put it, you're like the steam from a hot plate of soup that goes into the other person and disappears. So that's a world, I think, in which this sort of mechanism is dominant, and it's not at all like taking something in, it's disappearing into something, with even the anxiety that you might totally disappear. And, when we meet it clinically, I think you'll find that we are unmoved, it's a form of projective identification (if it's taking place with the patient) in which we are unmoved. Whatever the drama that is brought, and whatever circumstance which we would expect to resonate with us, doesn't resonate. And this notion of, when is normal projective identification missing, which I think we just heard a good example, I think of it, you see...it's like reciting hymns without the music, and it's like somebody who comes into your sessions and they recite all these hymns without any music; and so, you hear the words, and the feelings you would expect to be having are missing. And I think that's a very particular clinical situation.

Can I just add on to this? Because in terms of this discussion about normal and abnormal projective identification, isn't one of the issues that's implicit in this, whether somebody – the projector – is in a narcissistic state, that the identificate in Sohn's idea is mainly to do with projection. Whereas, whether you call it introjective identification or acquisitive, there's something to do with whether you accurately relate to the object, and so you put yourself in someone else's shoes in an accurate way, rather than some sort of more narcissistic way. I was very interested Ron mentioned Rilke, and without wanting to put an advert for my own paper in a week's time, of course Rilke and the whole experience of falling in love and not existing, I think Ron will probably agree, *must* be linked to the fact that Rilke's mother related to Rilke as a little girl, the little girl that she'd lost, and named him with this ambiguous feminine name. And Ron's paper actually quotes this very moving poem about the mother impacting – poor old Rilke's trying to construct his identity, I think, as a little boy, but he's got this mother who insists on relating to him as a little girl, which then leads to another dimension of the whole interaction of projective identification, which I'm looking at next week, which is: what happens when you get parents who project into their infants in ways in which the identity of the infant is actually misconstrued, and the predicament of somebody who's on the receiving end of...because as people have said, it's a means of communication but also a means of *miscommunication* and *misattribution*.

JOHN STEINER

Well I thought, this discussion again suggests two things: one, that it takes time to understand what's happening, and I was struck with Ignes describing this death instinct-driven repetition compulsion, which is just non-understandable initially, but as it does get repeated, something may at least evolve, and I thought, that's one thing that miscommunication can eventually evolve into something; but the other thing I think Ron was stressing, was that fantasy is important, and sometimes an identification arises from a fantasy of getting into something, sometimes it's a fantasy of digesting something, they can both be



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concrete, but if he can listen to the fantasy it makes a difference what sort of process is going on.

IGNES SODRE

But isn't it also that the analyst's imagination is contributing to that too? Because each of us will have a different picture anyway, I mean I was thinking about Ron's description, of what he imagined about the patient and about Rilke. But of course, we can go with the main feeling of it, but you might imagine it more in terms of taking something in, or more in terms of disappearing into the object, and there are various kinds of disappearing into the object, as there are various kinds of swallowing the object. I mean, you can be the patient who completely, like a baby, cannibalistically, swallowed the object, swallowed the breast completely,— in fact I think Melanie Klein says that in an example, she says – his body is only a shell, or his mind is only a shell; his body can be the clothes of the object in a way, so he can feel he's mostly a breast, vaguely covered by, you know, his own skin, his own eyes and so on. But the patient may imagine that, but presumably the patient wouldn't imagine it that concretely; you would have to be trying to find a fantasy, and you'd be contributing your own imagery to this fantasy, and then between the two of you something is going reasonably well. You might be able to achieve, for that moment, the picture that seems to be satisfying – at that moment it seems to have meaning, it seems to represent something. Obviously then it gets lost and it becomes something else; but it's *two* imaginations really, and *two* fantasies working together, or working against each other.

JOHN STEINER

Was there someone else? Oh, Sally, I think Sally Weintrobe and then Dave.

SALLY WEINTROBE

I'm finding this discussion absolutely fascinating and very interesting indeed. I don't actually know if what I want to say is sufficiently coherent to say, but it was going back to – my thought was sparked off by David Taylor bringing up stones and objects, and what we project into them, and the fact that in analysis we've always kept the word 'object' – very wisely we've kept that word and – that ...anyway, my mind went on to small children and the fantastic way that they see meaning, and the animism of small children. You know, you take a little grandchild on the underground, and they'll say goodbye to the train and, you know, they're projecting all over, and it's extremely difficult for them to work out what is a human object to project into. You know it made me...what I was thinking was, is one of the ways that we stop being – well as Piaget said, we never stop being animistic; when we talk about the weather, you know, the clouds are moving, we never give it up really. But, is part of our learning what is animate and inanimate, learning what we can't project into and what's not going to give us anything back? It's a very very complicated subject. Anyway, it's not that I want to say anything coherent about it but I just wanted to add those thoughts in, about the power of how much we want to communicate with just about everything we come across, you know, and the great difficulty we have in sorting that out really.



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JOHN STEINER

I think that's a very interesting point, don't you, that it's an important learning process: what can you project into and get a response back.

ELIZABETH SPILLIUS

What can't you!

JOHN STEINER

Yes, or whether a response is delusional, and I think that's connected with these situations where some patients seem not to be able to elicit a response.

RON BRITTON

But don't you think, with stones, and trees and rocks and things, as Wordsworth put it, describing poor Lucy who is now circulating around the universe along with the stones and trees and so on, when she's dead. If we're going to make a distinction between animate and inanimate, it just strikes me that to do that, we have to give up the projective identification that makes inanimate objects animate – even to recognize a distinction, that there are inanimate objects. So I think quite a lot of this business, there's a lot of giving up that has to go along with some kind of realizing about distinctions, and what is eventually human and what is not human, and what is mindful and what isn't mindful. But all of this does seem to me to require relinquishment, we have to give up our preference for animating. I'm grateful to Sally, because I think that's one of the sort of expressions of a kind of projective identification, that we can pretend anything's animate, and we're very reluctant to give up the teddy bear as a consequence.

JOHN STEINER

Isn't that also part of poetry, that we do invest things with our fantasies? I'm struck by, there's a section where Keats described a sparrow coming onto his window, and how with every peck on the pane Keats moves forward, moves his head forward, and so he completely inhabits this sparrow; and yet you can't...it's not psychotic.

RON BRITTON

No, but at least, unlike some of Wordsworth's examples, the sparrow is alive, whereas one of his poems begins, 'There is a rock,' and he goes on to evoke the rock as being one of his great companions. So, these distinctions...

SPEAKER (UNKNOWN)

That's a bit more psychotic. *[laughter]*

RON BRITTON

As poetic, yes, as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

DAVID BELL

Two things I want to say, one was that we do seem to be, as far as I've understood it, settling for the idea that the effect on the external object is part of



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the definition, is within the definition of projective identification, as opposed to that being the actualization or the enactment, the second part. But the other thing I wanted to say – I may not have this quite right – but I think that the definition in the dictionary of empathy is the capacity to project yourself into another in order to apprehend their thoughts and feelings. So I think I was linking a bit with this whole question of curiosity, discovery, imagination. So, if one imaginatively enters another person, but with the valency of discovery as opposed to the valency of control, then it is not predetermined what one is going to discover in the other. Nevertheless, if what one discovers in the other – and I'm talking here not about actually meeting another person, I'm thinking of being in one's room on one's own, and being able to empathically understand, say, another person's state of mind. Of course if you do understand it, what you've brought to it is something within yourself, but because you've understood it or located it within yourself, you've recognized or discovered its presence in the other. So, you obviously cannot discover something in another mind that you don't already have acquaintance with. But, I think the difference is this area that is not predetermined, and it contains imagination, curiosity and discovery, rather than control and static and determined.

JOHN STEINER

Well surely it's a process isn't it? If you want to understand by projective identification, you're projecting your own identity into them, which may be right or may be wrong – you've got to then withdraw, and observe, and check, and then the process goes on again. It seems the danger is with these rigid fixed things where you think because *I'd* behave, you know, *I'd* be angry if it was me; and it's not me, so it has to go to and fro, and I think that's what you're talking about: when there's curiosity there's a process initiated.

DAVID BELL

I suppose I just wonder whether it should be called projective identification at all, if that kind of empathic...it seems so different from the other process, that part of our confusion is we're using the same word (as you started off by saying) to discover, to examine things that are very, very different from each other.

JOHN STEINER

Shall we ask the panel to make a final comment?

RON BRITTON

I'd just like to leave a question for everybody to think about and – is it something to do with what we've been talking about, the recent, not-so-recent now, but it's a case I've described several times, of the man who advertised on the internet and found somebody who was willing to be eaten, and killed him and cannibalized him. Now, the story is obviously interesting about him, but what about the chap who volunteered? And, how does that relate to the sort of thing we've been talking about? What was his great impulse? Because he participated, he not only volunteered but he actively participated in the beginning of the process, starting with his penis being cut off and then cooking



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it together. So, is this phenomenon, I mean it's always puzzled me, so I ask you to go away and think about it [*laughter*]; what is the motive for being eaten?

IGNES SODRE

Can somebody now offer a really, really delightful story for us to think about tonight which is not Ron's story, please [*laughter*].

JOHN STEINER

This wasn't a threat. [*laughter*]

EDNA O'SHAUGHNESSY

I was just going to say to end with, being now so ancient, I notice all kinds of trends and two of them would be: tendency to idealise uncertainty, and I would say, let's not do that. I do think we can know things, not infallibly, like the Pope, but we can know them, possibly being mistaken about what we know. And the other thing is to do with projective identification, that I think we're all aware that it has made an enrichment of how we can work and think but, as people have been saying this evening, it can also be, sort of, used in a trendy way; like, recently a supervisee comes in and says, 'I feel so pressured,' sits down, waits, as if this is enough – well it's not! [*laughter*] Well alright, I'll leave it at that.

ELIZABETH SPILLIUS

I found this discussion very helpful and very moving too, because I think in a way we're all repeating a process that early analysts went through, and particularly Klein tried to make it explicit; that when you encounter things that you don't understand, it's quite tempting to jump into some system that will explain it too soon. And she would say to hold off, and not to explain things too much, to let them be the way they were, and not to fix it, though she quite admired people at the same time who were trying to conceptualize things, even if she didn't agree with it. And finally, in a way, this idea of hers was an attempt to try and structure something a little bit more, without killing it; because the problem with trying to structure it too soon is that you are in very great danger of killing it, and just having a formal idea that has very little meaning. And I think that she really did her best, and she didn't have the kind of mind that would slice things up and make it all clear, and she waited; and this was when the penny dropped, so to speak, this gave her a bit of a language. And it's far from perfect, but it's the beginning. And it's interesting that many Americans, when they read this, they said this is all rubbish!, and they all wanted a new definition which was their personal one, which was a great deal better than this one – and something that we all do actually. But how to keep the balance of not being certain, and just getting muddled on the one hand, and trying to conceptualize things too much too soon in this very delicate operation – in sessions but also in trying to conceptualize more generally, what's analysis about?

JOHN STEINER

Ignes?



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IGNES SODRE

Just going with what Elizabeth is saying, that anything that opens things up must be a positive thing, and anything that fixes and closes and takes space away must not be such a great thing. And the other thing is to remember that the concept is a concept, isn't it? It's there to be modified, thought about in various ways and so on – it's not a truth, a fact, it's an idea, isn't it, that's to be filled in and moved about and so on in various ways.

JOHN STEINER

Well thank you very much, I'd like to thank the cast – I was going to say, you've seen the film now read the book [*laughter and applause*].