

Article

PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION AS A DEFENSE MECHANISM WHEN FACING THE THREAT OF AN ECOLOGICAL HAZARD

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Abstract

The article examines the psychological use of projective identification to deal with the threat inherent in a severe ecological hazard. When information was uncovered regarding the high incidence of cancer diagnosed among Israeli soldiers who trained in a polluted river during their military service in an elite commando unit, a group of parents came together to demand that the state take responsibility for the sick soldiers. In contrast, their soldier-sons preferred to continue identifying with the army's position, which denied the connection between cancer and training in the polluted river. We argue that when fear arises for the lives of the soldier-sons they project their unbearable parts into their parents, who hold their projected parts and take concrete action, and relieve them of the struggle between the pole of life and the pole of death. The process ends when the state finally acknowledges its responsibility for the soldiers, thus enabling transformation.

Keywords

projective identification; parent/soldier-sons relations; ecological hazard; cancer

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Introduction

The threat inherent in ecologic pollution has been publicly acknowledged for over 50 years. The large-scale mercury poisoning that occurred in Minamata Bay, Japan, in 1952, was one of the notable landmarks in addressing the issue of industrial waste. Inhabitants of a fishing village were poisoned after consuming fish they had caught in a bay where untreated industrial waste had been dumped. Seven hundred people died as a result of this tragic incident, and there were subsequent reports of deformed babies being born. International organizing to address environmental preservation began in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, and several environmental preservation treaties have since been signed by numerous countries. Although the ecological threat of environmental pollution is not perceived as a local problem, and there is ever-increasing awareness of the issue, attitudes toward ecological hazards are generally repressed and distanced from the lives of individuals, and assigned to the field of operation and responsibility of “green” organizations or unique groups of “environment-freaks”.

The moment in which an ecological hazard becomes a public concern is not only associated with uncovering information regarding its existence, but also with the point at which it converges with the level of high personal threat it conveys. The present paper presents an incident in which soldiers who served in an elite commando unit in the Israeli Army (Israel Defense Forces – IDF) had, for years, been exposed to a threat to their lives due to training in the waters of a river polluted with heavy metals. Acknowledgement of the danger and the subsequent demand to treat the soldiers who were already sick as well as those who were not yet sick, occurred by means of dramatic changes in the relationship between the soldier-sons and their parents. The case in question examines the complex interaction between the soldier-sons and their parents when fear arises for the health or lives of the sons following the high incidence of cancer diagnosed among soldiers who served in this elite commando unit.

Organized civilian protest against military actions is well-known and documented (e.g., the rigorous protests of American civilians in the 1960s against the American Army’s actions in Vietnam), but none of the literature yielded a description of active intervention by soldiers’ parents who sought to protect their children from military activity associated with a severe ecological hazard that posed a threat to their children’s health. The actions of the parents assume unique psychological significance because their soldier-sons project their anxieties and can therefore remain loyal to the military unit while apparently objecting to the organization and protest of their parents. We will argue that when a conflict arises between identifying with the military and its absolute messages (such as preserving secrecy and absolute loyalty to the unit and its commanders), and identifying with human values advocating preservation of

human life, the parents unconsciously hold their sons' projected unbearable anxieties, fear of death and disease, and thus relieve them of the struggle between the "pole of death" and the "pole of life". The principal concept employed to examine the relationship between the parents and the soldier-sons is projective identification, which serves as a psychological process that is simultaneously a type of defense mechanism, a means of communication, a primitive form of object relationship, and a pathway for psychological change (Ogden, 1979). After a transformation has occurred, the sons can take their projections back from their parents, the object with which the pole of life was deposited for safekeeping.

Background

Israel is an immigration country for the Jewish people, and its population has increased almost eight-fold in its 50 years of existence. The country's economic basis has shifted from agriculture to industry and the services sector. Accelerated development processes typified the establishment of the state, and development of the infrastructure and exploitation of natural resources ignored environmental considerations.

Since Israel is a country that has been fighting for its independence and defense since its establishment, defense issues are of the highest importance and are consequently backed up with extensive budgets that are far larger than those allocated to any other issue, and certainly to issues associated with environmental preservation. The result is manifested in often-irreversible damage to elements of the natural environment – air, water, and soil. In particular, damage was caused by heavy metals used in industry. A concentration of heavy industrial plants, including refineries and other petrochemical factories, was built in the vicinity of Haifa, in close proximity to the point where the Kishon River flows into Haifa Bay and its large commercial port. As we know, the waste from factories such as these contains carcinogenic and mutagenic materials originating from heavy metals that do not break down. High concentrations of these materials cause various diseases, such as cancer, in humans who are exposed to them.

In May 2000, two Israeli journalists published an exposé that shook the Israeli public to the core. It revealed that soldiers had, for years, been training in a river that was highly contaminated with industrial waste that was being dumped by the nearby factories. Despite the potential danger of contact with the polluted waters causing serious illness, particularly various forms of cancer, the army had failed to take any action to actively safeguard its soldiers (Tal-Shir and Yechezkeli, 2000). Owing to the highly selective criteria for admittance into this elite unit, it was clear that the soldiers had been in excellent health and top physical condition at the time of their recruitment. Hence, the high incidence of illnesses and mortality among them could not be explained by random statistics.

In their petition to the courts, a small group of soldiers demanded an objective and independent inquiry to investigate the connection between diving in the Kishon River and the high incidence of cancer in the unit. Following their petition, a Commission of Inquiry was appointed and headed by retired Supreme Court Justice Shamgar, a highly respected public figure in Israel. Testimonies showed that information had been brought to the attention of Navy commanders as early as 1989, warning of the possible health hazard associated with coming into contact with the contaminated waters of the Kishon. Despite this information, the army continued to conduct its training exercises there, and ignored the implications of the information.

Beyond the humanitarian, legal, or ecological aspects involved, the testimonies before the Commission gave rise to extreme tension and presented a clash between the collective national consensus of loyalty to the army and values that dictate preservation of the individual's life. Faith in the army is perceived as being at the core of the underlying contract between parents and commanding officers, who are committed by this contract to do everything in their power to safeguard the welfare of the soldier-sons. The unwritten and undisputed "contract" between the state and the soldiers and their families stipulates that soldiers follow orders in the course of their military service, to the extent of risking their personal safety and lives. In return, the state, through the IDF's commanders and the Ministry of Defense, guarantees full care for them and their families in case of injury in the line of duty. In its conduct in the Kishon Affair, the army apparently breached this contract twice: First, when it exposed the soldiers to unnecessary danger, and then when it refused to acknowledge the connection between the dives and the damage to the soldiers' health, and failed to take responsibility for treating the victims.

The silence maintained by the parents during the initial months occurred concurrently with conflicting messages spread by the Navy regarding the very right of the Commission of Inquiry to exist. The Navy, upon which the public commission had been forced, conveyed to the soldiers an official and overt message discouraging them from giving testimony before the Commission. Reactions of a hostile nature, including explicit threats of expulsion from the unit, were directed on a "fraternal" level toward soldiers who wanted to cooperate with the Commission. The vast majority of soldiers ignored the activities of the Commission and the ongoing investigation. This reaction was congruent with the tradition of the commandos, who are known as the "Men of Silence" and who practice total secrecy and absolute loyalty to the unit and its operations. We will endeavor to shed light on the unconscious interpersonal discourse that developed between the parents and their soldier-sons, and highlight the significance of this discourse, as well as the discourse between the parents themselves and its contribution to Israeli society.

Contribution of projective identification to understanding the issue

Melanie Klein defined projective identification as the transference of psychological content from one person to another, from the intra-personal to the inter-personal, by externalizing part of the self onto an external object. The external object serves as a container that allows a person to experience inner feelings as more bearable, and to re-internalize them in a manner that will enable reduction of anxieties and the accompanying sense of “falling apart”. According to Klein’s theory, a threat to the individual causes a split between the good and bad object, splitting the object into two – the good object and the bad object – and projection of part of the ego into it. The concept of projective identification describes the process in which, within the framework of an object relationship, a child projects bad feelings and emotions onto the parent, and the parent receives them in order to protect the child from them.

In her paper, *Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms* (1946), Klein (1975 [1946]) describes this as one of several mechanisms whose function is to protect from primal paranoid anxiety: the fearful baby wants to expel anxieties and aggression and does this by splitting himself and projecting his excrements into the mother’s body. The baby subsequently feels persecuted by the object (the mother), yet at the same time the baby also identifies with it. Segal describes the process of projective identification as a process in which the projector perceives the object as someone who has adopted the characteristic features of those parts of the ego that he himself has projected into the object. Based on this assumption, the projector begins to identify with the object of his projection. Segal (1974) argues that the projective identification mechanism is the basis for the earliest form of empathy.

Bion (1963) was the first to draw a distinction between normal projective identification that occurs in the depressive position, and pathological projective identification that originates in the paranoid-schizoid position. In the course of normal projective identification, the mother of the projecting baby is able to understand and accept his bad feelings and retain her own balanced outlook. The mother is able to contain the feelings of her baby and behave in a manner that will enable him to bear those feelings that he experiences as “unbearable” until such time that he can re-internalize them and contend with them more successfully. When this process is disrupted, the baby turns to ever-intensifying projective identification and may eventually drain himself completely. “The link between patient and analyst, or infant and breast, is the mechanism of projective identification” (Bion, 1967, p 106). Klein, Bion, Ogden and others argue that projective identification is a mechanism that facilitates pre-verbal communication by which the baby conveys its unbearable, non-verbal anxiety to its mother.

Kernberg (1976) defines projective identification as a primitive defense mechanism consisting of several concurrent and interdependent processes: projecting unbearable aspects of the intrapsychic experience into the object, acquiring empathy for the projected parts, and attempting to control the object as part of an effort at self-defense from the unbearable intrapsychic experience. He proposes that projective identification should be viewed as a defensive, primitive operation that is not necessarily associated with pathological situations. In his opinion, the process of projective identification indicates that the subject has the ability to distinguish between the self and the non-self, and between intrapsychic reality and external reality, which requires a certain degree of development and ability to cope. Kernberg's main contribution focuses on the ability to examine utilization of this mechanism in life situations that are not necessarily pathological.

Steiner (1993) proposes that containment and the subsequent process of re-internalization that follows should only be regarded as a first phase, which does not end in childhood. He suggests that the projector needs the object to continue functioning as a container. Even after the first phase ends and the parts contained by the object are internalized into the self, a person may experience situations where he feels that he has reached an impasse. At such moments a person may act out of alarm and "stick" to the object, fantasizing that he can control the object, thus evoking an idealization of earlier life periods while denying the loss entailed in shifting from containment to relinquishment, from dependence to independence. In the first phase, the parts of the self that are contained in the object are internalized, but real separation is not yet achieved. The second phase is accompanied by bad feelings of transition from containment to relinquishment and from dependence to independence. The projector cannot re-internalize his projections unless he mourns the loss of the object, and he cannot allow the object to "die" and to mourn its loss without re-internalizing his projections.

Tom Main (1975) asserts:

Projection of impulses and projective identification of parts of the self into others are elements in "normal" mental activity. When followed by reality testing, trial externalizations of aspects of the self help an individual to understand himself and others... (Main, 1975, p 105).

Hinshelwood (1991) describes Bion's notion of "container-contained" as "an attempt to raise the concept of projective identification to a general theory of human functioning – of the relations between people and between groups..." (Hinshelwood, 1991, p 191).

Bion (1970) presents three modes of container-contained relations:

Fragmented container: The content, which is transferred in the process of projective identification, is dense, tumultuous, animated and has "explosive" qualities. The content floods the container, which bursts and cannot contain the

content that has been projected into it. A relationship built within such a situation is fragile, and the principal experience is one of absence of containment.

Rigid container: The rigidity of the container does not enable any real content to penetrate it. It is as if the container refuses to express or react to what is being projected into it; hence, the projected content loses form and meaning.

Flexible container: The contained enters the container and affects it, and the container in turn, due to its form and function, shapes the contained. This container-contained relationship is a flexible one that continuously develops and grows. It is an ongoing process of mutual influence and operational survival. The mother with her balanced containment abilities enables the projector to transform and metabolize thoughts and emotions.

By adopting the three modes proposed by Bion, we shall examine the way in which the parents contend with the content their children project into them. In the course of their military service, the soldier-sons supposedly undergo a process of adaptation, or in other words, internalization of the army's values in which they allow military education to influence their personalities. The military educational heritage inculcates the value of giving "to the last drop of blood". However, when confronted with a risk to the health or lives of their soldier-sons, the parents are "enlisted", in place of their children, to the role of holding and preserving the life-wish. Many protest movement activists (e.g., the Four Mothers Movement at the end of the 1990s that called for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon), acted against the policies of the government, which operates the military system in a manner that poses an unnecessary threat to the lives of their soldier-sons. In our estimation, the soldier-sons projected parts of themselves into their parents, actively pressuring them to feel, think, and act in accordance with the projection. The parents, unconsciously, acted from a position of balanced containment and an unconscious desire to relieve their children of those parts that were experienced by both the children and their parents as "unbearable". Thus, they enabled their soldier-sons to continue loyally to serve the army and the state. We presume that in existing conditions in Israel in general, and in elite military units in particular, the social norms that compel soldiers to "give their all" to the state render the soldiers unable to digest and contain the integrative "compromising" connections between good and bad, between the right of the individual to life and loyalty to the army.

We can analyze the dynamic processes of projective identification by describing the functioning of two groups of parents in the Kishon Affair. From the narcissistic point of view, the first group, the "silence breakers", had sufficient areas of depressive or non-narcissistic functioning to enable them to be generative and act from non-narcissistic motives. Consequently, they reacted, unconsciously, to the projections and adopted the projected parts as their own. This group became an active partner in the drama and functioned as a "flexible container" for their soldier-sons. In the second group, the "silence keepers",

either the narcissistic bond did not enable them to receive the unconscious communications of their sons, or their narcissism did not enable them to put their sons' survival above their sons' status.

Case description – the soldiers' parents

Research methodology

The present study employed a constructivist-qualitative research methodology, which employs situated activity to examine an event and attempts to extract meaning or interpret behavior that occurs in its natural environment. The research tools include recorded conversations, interviews, and field notes. Considerable attention was accorded to the researcher's personal responsibility to the rules of ethics and to hearing multiple voices as they were expressed in the discourse texts.

The study was undertaken after the researchers noted that the hearings of the Shamgar Commission of Inquiry into the causal connection between dives in the Kishon River and cancer were being attended by a small number of parents of healthy sons who had served in the *Shayetet* commando unit, who expressed their profound personal concern. The very involvement of these parents, who on the face of it were not directly involved in the affair, focused the researcher's attention on the emotional processes that led them to choose their course of action. Personal and direct contact with these parents enabled the researchers to obtain their consent to conduct a structured study and methodologically monitor this group of parents.

In the first stage of the study, the meetings of the parents' group of "silence breakers" were recorded and transcribed. To the recorded material were added personal notes that described the meetings, the atmosphere, and informal conversations that were held in the course of the event. In total, five group meetings, and a further three meetings that took place in smaller forums with representatives of the parents' group, were all documented. We were unable to obtain the minutes of a meeting that was held between the parents' representatives, retired Supreme Court Justice Shamgar, and two members of the Commission of Inquiry, and for which a verbal account was provided by the parents.

At the same time, 10 personal interviews were conducted with families from the parents' group of "silence keepers". These meetings were prearranged and held in the families' homes. Each meeting lasted for an hour and a half to two hours and was recorded in full. The ethnographic interview was open in structure, while the agreed definition of the subject matter was "a description of the relationship between the parents and their *Shayetet* commando sons".

If the interview concluded without the parents addressing the question of the danger entailed in diving in the Kishon, they were asked about it directly and

once only, and their response was received without the discussion being further developed by the interviewer.

The theoretical assumptions presented in the article were only formulated after all the research material had been gathered, and are examined from within the material at our disposal.

The "silence breakers"

The parents of soldiers who served in the naval commandos, the *Shayetet*, are similar in many respects to parents of soldiers in other elite units. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of parents of *Shayetet* soldiers is primarily manifested in their absolute acceptance of the demand to maintain secrecy, a commitment that was conveyed by their sons as unconditional and uncompromising. The secrecy surrounding service in the unit was therefore manifested in the silence assumed by the parents of the soldiers as well. Adopting the code of the unit was apparently the most "active" behavior the parents were able to choose. The silence of the parents was accompanied by a sense of pride at being parents of soldiers serving in this elite unit.

What led the parents' group of "silence breakers" to organize themselves and take joint action against the army?

We will suggest that the parents' group of "silence breakers" functioned as a "flexible container", and that by the very act of organizing themselves to take action, they expressed their ability to contain the "poisonous" and unbearable materials of their sons. Thus, they helped them to reprocess the materials by containment, as well as by taking actual protest actions. This course of action enabled the sons to undergo a process of transformation later on.

The parents' group of "silence breakers" held "parents' meetings" during November and December 2000. More than 20 parents attended the first meeting. The atmosphere was tense. The parents seemed hesitant in their interactions with one another and lacked confidence in the active step they had taken. Although the purpose of the meeting was to conduct an initial discussion regarding possible courses of action that would assure medical treatment for their children, the discussion focused on their relationships with their soldier-sons. The parents repeatedly mentioned that they were attending the meeting despite the objections of the "children" to their involvement. The entire meeting focused on the intense desire that motivated the parents to take organized action although, as previously mentioned, the discussion was dominated by talk of relationships with the sons, not the army. Several parents stated that this was the first time since their sons had been recruited into the *Shayetet* that they were acting in a manner that was incongruent with the clearly defined codes of the unit. In conversations that preceded the meeting, most of the soldier-sons expressed their objections to the actions of their parents. However, the implied cooperation of the children with their parents is evident in the opening address of the father who organized the meeting:

I asked how I could reach the families. Contact was made through the children, because they gave me the telephone numbers... gave them gladly.

During the meeting the parents stated a variety of reasons for their decision to “break the silence” despite the overt opposition of their sons. They expressed strong parental feelings, which motivated them to act for their sons and protect them:

The attitude of our children is somewhat indifferent; perhaps they don't like to talk about the subject. My son said to me: Dad, leave it, it's nonsense, there are others who are looking into it. But I told him: Look, we, the parents, see it from a different perspective, and the sooner the better.

Did the soldier-sons indeed object to their parents' activities? The message they conveyed was:

Do what you like, and we will do what is right for us:
Mother, you do what you feel comfortable with, but I won't be taking any medical tests at this stage.

None of the soldier-sons attended the parents' meeting. Although the dialogue in the meeting was seemingly conducted between the parents and themselves, the parents were in effect representing themselves and their sons at one and the same time. Later on, the parents mustered the courage to fight the military system at a time when their sons were unable or did not allow themselves to do so. The very fact of the discourse conducted by the parents about their involvement in the investigation into the Kishon Affair undermined the separateness and distinction that had so clearly existed between them and their soldier-sons since they were recruited into the elite military unit.

Winnicott (1986) describes projective identification as having the characteristics of direct communication between one person's unconscious and another person's unconscious without the mediation of interpreting subjects. As a result, the receiver frequently feels that the projection is being forced upon him and that he is playing a role in the psychological drama of the projector, without being able to contain it himself. Indeed, the parents were not happy with the role into which they had been cast almost against their will, but they felt and believed that this was the best way to protect their sons.

Like everyone else, we too are very concerned... The children don't want to cooperate, out of loyalty – they don't understand that in this instance the army hasn't been loyal to them... Now we are the ones who have to decide how to deal with the issue... The children don't want to cooperate.

In the process of projective identification experienced by the parents, the role of the containing object that they took upon themselves without interpersonal psychological distinction is evident:

And naturally, when they're young, children don't know what they're doing. The children aren't cooperating; they aren't prepared to cooperate. I think that it's our duty as parents...

The motivation of the parents to engage in the issue despite the activities of the Commission of Inquiry emerged from their unconscious desire to create a "channel of communication" with their sons, and thus help them to contend with the split between their loyalty to the army and their instinctive desire to take responsibility for their health.

Even if nothing concrete comes out of it in the end, perhaps the very fact that this meeting is taking place and the discussions that follow – because each and every one of us will no doubt talk to the children at home and tell them about it – will generate some sort of dialogue on the subject. It will also help and contribute to arousing or heightening the self-awareness of each of the former soldiers to be attentive to changes in their condition, even if they are healthy.

Involvement was forced upon the parents by an "inner voice". On the conscious level, they understood the change as a process of awakening from their previous situation of blindness, of not knowing and not understanding. In a later, very painful, understanding it became clear to them that only they, the "real parents", are supposed to look after their sons and care for them. It was only the army's agreement to conduct medical tests following the Shamgar Commission's interim ruling (January 2001), coupled with acknowledgement of its duty to care for the sick soldiers until the Commission completed its investigations, that enabled the parents to experience a certain sense of relief. The parents reported that during the period following their getting together to take action, the tension between them and their sons was significantly reduced, and a channel of communication was opened to them in reference to the various aspects raised by the Kishon Affair. This communication was manifested more practically later on in the full willingness of the soldier-sons to undergo medical tests.

The parents' involvement, coupled with the Commission's ruling compelling the military and the state to take responsibility for conducting medical tests, enabled the transformation. In effect, it was only when the army and the parents acted for the sons from the same position of concern and responsibility that the sons were able to undergo medical tests without experiencing this as betrayal of the codes of army or their personal health. Thus, homeostasis was restored and the sons were able to reclaim the split parts and relieve their parents of the psychological trust they had placed in them.

The "silence keepers"

A large group of parents preferred to refrain from taking action. It is our estimation that these parents were unable to contend with the "undigested materials" that their sons projected into them. The quality of the new content

that was projected into the parents threatened to undermine the homeostasis extant in the relationship between the soldiers and the unit, as well as between the parents and the army. Interviews with the parents' group of "silence keepers" show that they did not ignore the risks to their sons, but provided explanations for creating emotional distance from their sons and not joining the organization to take action. The most common explanation was that they chose to remain loyal to their sons' wishes to continue to protect the wall of silence and persist in their loyalty to the codes of the unit. In effect, the parents' group of "silence keepers" refrained from meeting the psychological needs of their sons, despite the explicit and implicit intimations communicated by the sons to convey their need for containment and change. These parents experienced anxiety and pain when they discovered that their sons were facing a health risk, but they also identified with their sons' helplessness and duplicated it when they were unable to decipher their call for help. It is not our intention to argue that all the parents who chose to refrain from taking action were driven by these motivations alone. We are aware of the multitude of circumstances and reasons that might have tipped the scale in favor of deciding not to act (such as the advanced age of the parents, health problems, personal/family problems, and so on). However, we maintain that the choice of some of the parents not to act manifests a particular relationship pattern between them and their sons. In this type of relationship, the ability to contain and transform, which enables a parent to act as a flexible container, is absent.

We wish to demonstrate and illustrate the dynamics of this relationship by presenting a description of two families who chose to maintain silence and not become actively or emotionally involved.

Amir completed his military service, returned to his kibbutz, and started a family. His parents recounted that he refused to answer questions regarding the Kishon Affair. However, our request to meet with his parents and interview them was submitted to him, and he gave his full consent.

Yair, a commander who was released from the army after many years of regular military service, publicly expressed his objections in a military forum to cooperate with the Commission of Inquiry. He apparently took a clear, polar, and uncompromising stance. Our request to meet with his parents and interview them was submitted directly to them, but to the best of our knowledge, their consent was granted with his knowledge.

The story of the two families opens with a description of the wall of silence erected by their sons during their military service, a subject that was also central in the interviews conducted with other parents:

Amir's mother: I can't tell you much because Amir didn't say much either... He talked a lot with the fish, a lot, and not with us, his parents. The language was with the fish.

Yair's father: He talked very little, and we knew even less. That is, he didn't tell us anything at all.

The accounts of the parents show that they accepted the duty of silence as a necessary condition in the mutual relationship with their sons. Occasionally the parents knew, after the fact, about the operational activities of their sons, but this knowledge was obtained indirectly rather than from the sons themselves.

Yair's mother: I'd get a phone call in the morning: Mother, how are you? And I'd say: Everything's fine, how are you? Fine. The newspapers would be delivered later in the day... and I'd see a headline: A Shayetet Operation. When he called, I didn't always make the connection between the phone calls and operations.

Amir's mother: Sometimes, when we did his laundry, I'd see bloodstained T-shirts. It really was very difficult for me to see... But he never said anything.

It appears that despite the unequivocal message conveyed by the sons, which mandated silence, they left signs that testified to harsh experiences, and opened a narrow crack into their world. A few cases, which were the exception, whereby the wall of silence was temporarily breached, were connected to death and loss, and raised the anxieties of the sons to an unbearable threshold.

Among the clothes he brought home to wash, Amir's parents found a black *kipa* (yarmulke), which is customarily worn by Jews in a house of mourning. This may have constituted a hinted call for attention, a hint of Amir's tangible and threatening encounter with death. From Amir's response it was understood that he had gone to pay his respects at the home of a comrade from the *Shayetet*.

Yair's parents also recounted that they knew when he went on condolence visits:

Where did you go on Saturday?

Ah, we met with this couple... you know... he was killed.

The unconscious desire for containment directed by the sons toward their parents appears in the interview with Yair's parents, in their reference to an incident that occurred 27 years prior to the interview, during the Yom Kippur War (1973). The twelfth-graders stopped going to school and worked in the place of civilians who had been mobilized for the war. In March, when most of those who had been called up had already been released, the question of going back to school was raised.

The kids had lost their desire to study; it was impossible for them to study. So the class voted against going back to school. And the parents accepted the children's decision. And for that he hasn't forgiven us to this day.

Their son's unconscious desire that they should act for his benefit "in spite of his manifest wishes" became evident to his parents only years later. It was only in

retrospect that they were able to feel and understand that they had made a mistake when they responded to the manifest rather than latent desire that their son had been unable to express, since it was incongruent with the norm set by his peer group. The parents explained their mode of action thus:

We were obedient... I only comprehended his anger over this matter much later, when it was already too late.

Despite their past experience and despite their knowledge that they as parents are required to protect their son, and contain needs and emotions that he is unable to express, the parents found it difficult to act differently when faced with the Kishon Affair. It was difficult for them to change the pattern of unconscious communication that existed in their relationship with their son. The parents raised the possibility that, in time, their son would develop the ability to see things differently, but refrained from undertaking a role that would force them to act contrary to his overtly declared stance.

The mother: The way he expressed himself wasn't sufficiently clear to penetrate our shell. He may have expressed himself, but we didn't comprehend it, I didn't comprehend...

The father: No, because otherwise she [the mother] would have passed it onto me. She's much more sensitive than me.

The parents use "shell" as a metaphor to describe the difficulty entailed in understanding the unconscious needs of their son. This metaphoric expression graphically represents the essence of the "rigid container".

The motif of pride in their sons appeared in both groups of parents, but was accorded greater centrality by the parents' group of "silence keepers". This group of parents perceived the respect accorded by society to their sons for belonging to an elite unit as respect for them too, as "successful parents". Like their sons, they could not "mourn" the loss of the "idealized object" – the elite unit (Steiner, 1993). Perhaps it was because it would damage their narcissistic pride that they found it even more difficult to surrender the fantasy regarding the perfection of the army and to take action against it. In interviews about the Kishon Affair, the parents' group of "silence keepers" recounted their choice to not take any action, and the parents were more focused on themselves rather than on communication with their sons. By contrast, the parents' group of "silence breakers" was more focused on their relationship with their sons and the different ways available to them to protect their needs and create a channel of communication with them. The variance between the modes of mutual interactions, as described by the parents, reinforces the assumption that the actions of the parents' group of "silence breakers" characterize it as a "flexible container", whereas the actions of the parents' group of "silence keepers" characterize it as a "rigid container".

Discussion

The relationship between the soldier-sons and their parents described in the present paper sheds light on the conflictual meeting place experienced by the sons within the ethical code of the army: a conflict between unconditional loyalty to the IDF and its commanders and the necessity of preserving their lives and health.

Pick (1985) argues that a patient projects his psychotic parts into the vulnerability of the analyst and, more than anything, he projects his guilt into it. The response of the analyst echoes the struggles of the patient with his own psychotic anxieties. The soldier-sons projected into their parents their feelings of guilt that surfaced when their loyalty to the army was shaken. The parents “received” this feeling out of identification: through the guilt they felt for bringing up their sons to believe that loyalty to the country takes precedence over all else. The parents’ feelings of guilt intensified when they began to understand that they themselves, as members of the society of adults, were unable to achieve the “yearned for” peace that would enable them to protect their sons.

From the clinical material gathered in interviews with the parents’ group of “silence breakers”, it is apparent that they were able to face up to the manifest objections of their sons and contain the covert stratum of their request for help, and take action.

The communicative system we have described is not solely limited to the early years of life. When Klein (1952) expanded on the relationship constructed between parent and child, she stopped referring to the paranoid-schizoid position as a developmental position, and viewed it as an emotional condition that recurs throughout a person’s life when faced with experiences of pain or conflict in the outside world. Bion (1959) argued that this situation typifies normal development and a healthy response to life situations that contain experiences of grief or loss. Steiner (1993) claims that a constant oscillation exists throughout life between the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position, and that the process of projective identification is dynamic, interactive, and interpersonal.

The projector is motivated by a fantasy of evacuating and emptying unbearable psychological content in a manner that will engender similar content or characteristics in another person (the receiver). If the receiver is able to contain and contend with the projected content, the projector will re-internalize it. This process of reorganizing a psychological condition is strongly and intimately linked to container-contained relations. Waska (1999) describes how projective identification facilitates finding a way to live with feelings that arouse anxiety in the relationship between the internal and the external. The object into which the anxiety is projected experiences the feelings of destruction, pain, and threat that the projector cannot bear. This process continues until

inner organization is achieved and the feelings are re-internalized in a manner that is experienced as less dangerous or threatening.

Observation of the relationships between the parents and their soldier-sons shows how the need to contend with anxiety and the undermined sense of confidence in the army brought an ancient “channel of communication” back to the arena – the projective identification established between the sons and their parents. The anxiety brought about a change to the life system that had been typified by distinction and separation, and restored the involvement of the parents in the lives of their sons. Whenever a new unbearable situation of conflict occurred which the sons could not contain by themselves (such as in the present case between the value of “dedication to the mission” and the value of “human life”), a regressive system developed and resurrected the archaic defense mechanism of projective identification, and it required the same kind of work from parents.

We suggest that the connection between the parents and their soldier-sons progressed along a spiral track on a horizontal surface: the sons began to distance themselves from their home when they were recruited into the army and settled into their unit, and continued this process of distancing when they built independent family lives for themselves. However, when a dangerous situation with which they were temporarily unable to contend arose, an unconscious shift toward their parents occurred. The central position devoted in the first parents’ meeting to the relationships between the sons and their parents are indicative of the intensity of this shift. It points to the jolt in the process, which had been perceived until then as natural and normative, where the progress of distancing, acquiring independence, and ending parental care occurs. The parents felt that they were being activated in a manner that was incongruent with their current relationship with their sons, but at the same time they felt that it was their duty, and that they were “compelled” to contain, process, and act as parents to soldier-sons who were unable to do so themselves.

Has this process of separation and differentiation from the parents indeed come to an end? We would argue that it was only in March 2003, after the Shamgar Commission submitted its conclusions, and following the decision of the Minister of Defense that the military would accept responsibility for the soldiers (to which the parents’ determined struggle was a contributing factor) that the sons were able to take back the material that had been re-digested and re-processed. Only then could they continue to live by acknowledging the ambivalent components of reality. This re-internalization resulted in the sons agreeing to accept the “verdict” and act for themselves, namely to undergo medical tests, and receive recognition and compensation for their disabilities.

Summary

The present paper examines a unique way of contending with a life-threatening ecological hazard. In Israel the army constitutes an integral component of

society and protesting against the rules and regulations of the army is viewed as virtually “breaking a taboo”. A group of civilians, parents of soldiers, broke the code of silence and raised public awareness of the ecological issue and its implications for the lives of civilians, and brought about change. The process occurred following the high incidence of illness and mortality among soldiers who had trained in the Kishon River, and central to the process was an unconscious psychological defense mechanism – projective identification. We view this mechanism as a normal defense mechanism, a means of communication, and a channel for psychological change that is not dependent on age or developmental stage, but on life situations. The prominence of the projective relationship and the ability to realize it changes according to life situations and the ability of parents to serve, albeit temporarily, as a “flexible container” for their children at any time. Furthermore, we propose that this process of splitting, projection, and re-internalization – the projective identification mechanism – should also be viewed as a social defense mechanism (Menzies, 1975).

When doubt is cast regarding the functioning of the army in reference to the lives and health of soldiers, the anxiety of the soldier-sons is transferred to the parents who are part of the civilian society in which they are free to act and protest. Thus, the military system is preserved, with its systemic-command structure, without the fighting echelon questioning the values of the army, whereas the civilian system fights for and preserves the values of human life and democracy. Whenever tensions rise between the military and civilian systems, and especially when the phenomenon of parents “enlisting” to protect their sons gains public sympathy in the media, the government implements local changes. It does not, however, make a substantial transformation in the way the army functions or in its values, and so it will not prevent recurrence of the soldier-sons needing the support of their parents. This social defense mechanism is apparently necessary to preserve the delicate balance between the civilian and military system. This raises the question of whether the information that was exposed, the high public involvement engendered by the Kishon Affair, and the subsequent investigation, will indeed lead to the formation of a civil defense system to prevent the exposure of civilians and of soldiers in the course of their military service to ecological hazards. We would like to note that as a result of this issue being brought to public awareness, another group of civilians, the Kishon River fishermen, were motivated to fight for their rights when it came to light that a high incidence of cancer from ecological hazards was being diagnosed among this group as well.

It is still too soon to conclude whether the social lesson has been learned regarding the value of human life. It is unclear whether the responsibility accepted by the government to care for the sick soldiers will simply serve to placate the population of parents, who will thus discontinue their struggle to change the situation and prevent future disasters, or whether it will constitute a

genuine change in perception in which ecological risks are taken into consideration and regarded as one of the potential risks to the lives and welfare of civilians and soldiers alike.

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