

Responding versus Reacting: Neville Symington's On the Possibility of Human Freedom (1990) and the concept of Projective Identification

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The paper refers to Neville Symington's concept of *responding versus reacting*, published in 1990, focusing on Bion's ideas on projective imagination as an inter-psychic phenomenon of nonverbal communication. Projective imagination as a communicative mode uses the other person as a container for unwanted thoughts and feelings, thus leading to *reactions* which attack the freedom to think one's own thoughts. In the mode of *responding* we abstain from projective identification, targeting at human freedom as we try to really answer the needs of the other person.

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Neville Symington

Neville Symington (1937–2019) was a distinguished fellow of the British Psychoanalytical Society. Born to British parents in Portugal, he went to England to study philosophy and theology, before training in the priesthood. Losing faith in Catholic doctrines, he turned to psychology and underwent a psychoanalytic treatment. Later on, he trained as an analyst himself within the British Independent Group, but was supervised by Kleinian analysts. After having emigrated to Australia, he served as president of the Australian Psychoanalytical Society between 1999 and 2002.

Together with his wife Joan Symington he published *The Clinical Thinking of Wilfried Bion* (Symington & Symington 1996), among his work probably best known. The book was called a "lucid account of Bion's theory" and "a highly valuable resource [...] to understand the potent and challenging ideas" of an analyst whom Symington called "the deepest thinker within psychoanalysis" (Sawbridge 2018).

A number of writers outside the psychoanalytic scope influenced Symington's thinking, among them Tolstoi, Buber and Socrates, whom he praised for his pursuit of truth, which is to some extent also W.R. Bion's main point. Among the central ideas in Symington's thinking is freedom, and this is what *On the possibility of human freedom* (Symington 1990) targets at, while focusing on thinking, projective identification and the concept that freedom comes from responding to each other instead of reacting.

On the possibility of human freedom

Symington states that the traditional debate on freedom has mistakenly focused on choice. Starting from more general ideas, he states that Determinists see us as a product of the social situation we live in, and that Libertarians believe that we are able to transcend causes, which means that we have a responsibility for our actions and explicitly have a choice. Reconciliationists believe that, although choices are determined, we still can choose – which might be somewhat contradictory. Symington refers to Bion and states that although Bion did not address freedom explicitly, nevertheless freedom was at the core of Bion’s clinical practice.

Symington states in his paper “On the possibility of human freedom” that

“...the expression of freedom lies in a person’s activity of thinking his own thoughts. A person who is able to think his own thoughts is free. When someone cannot think his own thoughts, he is not free.”

Symington continues then

“... Analysis gives us evidence that the way one person acts, affects the capacity for choice in another. The question of moral responsibility would seem always then lie within the province of pairs, small groupings or even larger groupings”.

Symington lines out that forces against freedom lie in social pressure upon the individual, and that in Kleinian thinking such social pressure is called *projective identification*. Projective identification usually would be used when feelings cannot be borne. Such feelings are pushed at another person as “a human receptacle” by projective identification, a process also called externalization as a defence mechanism. Intellectual knowledge as *knowing about something* will not interfere much with such phenomena. Affective knowledge, however, will enable us either to abstain from an action like projective identification, or to hinder it from working within us when we are chosen as the human receptacle. Symington pins out that the more affective knowledge – on what is going on within ourselves, within the other person, between two persons as a pair or within a group – is present, the less projective identification will have an effect.

Projective Imagination

Projective identification in itself is a concept without a universally accepted definition within the psychoanalytic community. Although it is mostly a Kleinian concept, nowadays Kleinian Analysts tend to deny a difference between projection (as a defence mechanism) and projective identification (Spillius & O'Shaughnessy 2012, Karpetsis 2014).

Symington refers to Bion's view of projective identification as a commonly used way to interact, not only as a pathological phenomenon, a view already outlined by Ogden (1979). Bion sees projective identification as a mental process, first used by the infant to communicate unbearable feelings to the caretaker (usually the mother) by externalization. The (mother) caretaker transfers such feelings into something more bearable, using her alpha-function and her capacity for rêverie and helps the infant to regulate feelings and the interaction with others.

As anybody has used projective imagination in early childhood, projective identification is common in human beings at any mental state which is affected by strong feelings, and especially when the reactive mode is in action. Knowing about reacting by projective imagination as an underlying principle and inter-psychoic process (Cox 2014) will enable professionals to act more freely (see Rûth 2009) and to understand clients, patients, ourselves and mates much better.

Responding versus reacting as a way to human freedom

Reacting serves one's own needs and desires towards the other person, *leaving* aside the other's emotional state. When reacting, projective identification is commonly used as a means of evacuating emotions or a state of mind, or even as a means of manipulation.

On the other hand, *responding* comes from a way of cooperating and from the centre of a person who favours the freedom of the other, having enough emotional knowledge. It is therefore an inter-psychoic phenomenon, and Symington states that

“...the person seeking freedom needs to find the personal centre of another in order to give free expression to himself or herself. Freedom arises out of the emotional intercourse between one person and another.”

Symington underpins that it is essential for human freedom to abstain from a reacting model where we use projective identifications. Freedom as an interactive process is built on the responding mode, where we act with emotional knowledge and connection to the needs of our fellows.

The responding mode is based on the working of alpha-function, which enables us to really *think* what otherwise would continue as a beta-element, consisting of mere impressions or injunctions within the personality. Alpha-function helps us to personally and subjectively process our own feelings and those of others into something bearable and works as the central force towards emotional knowledge.

Responding as a universal principle for Human Freedom

The responding mode is the core mental state in any human interaction which aims at personal freedom – such as in teaching, in education, or even in politics. Nevertheless, it is still a moral and, in a great number of regions of the world, even a political issue whether the other person’s freedom to think is a target of our actions.

Unfortunately, Neville Symington’s concept of reacting versus responding was somewhat lost on the way. This might be due to the fact that the paper’s title names freedom, and unfortunately not its underlying principle: Responding from the emotional centre of our person to the emotional centre of our fellows.

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