

Inverse Psychological Projection

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Freud (1894) defined “psychological projection” as a defense mechanism wherein individuals attribute negative aspects of their personality to others, allowing them to overlook their own flaws and problems. The inverse form of this concept occurs when someone repeatedly, often angrily, advises others to ignore or pay no attention to someone or something. This behavior typically signifies the person’s experience of inverse psychological projection: if their needs were disregarded in the past, it reflects in how they advise others. However, this advice is pertinent only in specific cases, such as trivial ridicule. If a mentally ill person insults someone’s appearance, ignoring them may be the best response.

However, if the type of hurt involves causing harm (e.g., public humiliation, contempt, invasion of privacy, incitement, threatening behavior, discrimination, abuse, sexual or ordinary harassment, violence, annoyance) or if what was said had already hurt the other, advising to ignore or pay no attention to the mentally ill person disregards the inflicted damage. This defense mechanism might surface in individuals who previously struggled to cope or deal with similar types of hurt or mental damage, or if their ego is provoked by the same issue. This stimulation might cause shame in acknowledging their ego, considering it socially inferior, or difficulty in empathizing with the other’s hurt feelings (or containing their bruised ego).

As a result, they deny the problem’s existence and advise others to ignore it. This action might aim to release their antagonism towards others or demonstrate superiority over the issue (or over the person they advise); they might also attempt to demonstrate their ability to rise above the same issue (or even above the other person) and “win” against them (and in some cases, they might belittle the other person for trying to satisfy or protect their ego, or for the fact that their ego was bruised in the first place). Moreover, in contrast to classic psychological projection, in which a person attributes negative aspects of their own personality to others when they are unable to deal with these aspects (so they can ignore them), in its inverse form, a person attributes the quality that they would like to but cannot demonstrate/be able to succeed in (which relates to their ability to efficiently manage issues or problems that provoke their own ego), so that they can avoid dealing with these issues or problems. Self inverse psychological projection occurs when people who are not able to cope or deal with their own issues or problems in general (and matters that provoke their own ego in particular) advise themselves to ignore or pay no attention to those matters, issues, or problems.

In similar situations, inverse psychological projection might involve phrases like “I don’t care what you think or say” or “Who cares what people think or say?” “I will not stoop to your level,” “Don’t let them influence you,” “Don’t give them the satisfaction,” “Don’t give them a platform,” “They aren’t worth it,” “Ignore the background noise,” or “What do you expect from them?” (one must distinguish between “expect” and “predict” as these two possess different responsibilities).

Alternatively, when discussing a television show, one may say, “Who even watches it?” and in the context of social media, “Don’t feed the trolls” or “Haters gonna hate.”

The relevant discussion is not whether one should theoretically/logically be hurt by someone else’s actions, but whether they were actually hurt by those actions. This is because the damage (for which it is indeed appropriate to address the harm caused by the person who had done those actions or pay attention to that person) is determined according to whether the victim was actually harmed by those actions, and not according to whether anyone should theoretically/logically be harmed by them, which leads to the question: Shouldn’t one address the damage someone else caused them (when the other person indeed inflicted harm) because they shouldn’t be hurt by them in the first place? It doesn’t make any sense. However, people may still advise others (or themselves) to ignore or pay no attention to someone who has harmed them. This advice, although irrelevant to the issue at hand, presents a contradiction.

Additionally, individuals might inadvertently project their negative emotions onto those seeking help. For instance, a hungry person tells their friend about their hunger, and the friend, also hungry, responds with something like, “Wow, you probably crave a good hamburger or a tasty pizza with olives and mushrooms.” This response fails to address the problem of hunger and can worsen the pain of the person seeking help by reflecting their own hunger on their already hungry friend, thereby making them hungrier.

Similarly, the expressions people use to dismiss others can also turn inward, reflecting a broader pattern of psychological defense. Phrases such as ‘I don’t care what you think or say’, ‘Who cares what people think or say?’, ‘I will not stoop to your level’, ‘Don’t let them influence you’, ‘Don’t give them the satisfaction’, ‘Don’t give them a platform’, ‘They aren’t worth it’, ‘Ignore the background noise’, ‘What do you expect from them?’, ‘I shouldn’t let this bother me,’ and ‘It’s not a big deal,’ along with similar ones, are common in both forms.

These phrases specifically illustrate how an individual might minimize (or even cancel) their own feelings or problems. For example, after receiving criticism at work (including work as a therapist), someone might tell themselves ‘I shouldn’t let this bother me,’ attempting to suppress their valid distress instead of addressing the situation. Irrespective of how the criticism is perceived (whether as fair or unjust), dismissing it (or personal setbacks generally) by thinking ‘It’s not a big deal’ can prevent individuals from confronting their feelings or seeking help, thereby prolonging unresolved issues and emotional discomfort. These expressions, whether directed at others or internally voiced, illustrate and elucidate how individuals attempt to dismiss concerns that challenge their self-image or provoke their ego (and that they are not able to cope or deal with in general), highlighting the pervasive use of these defense mechanisms across different contexts and life situations.

In the context of psychotherapeutic treatment, a therapist affected by this psychological projection struggles to show empathy towards their patients. This issue isn’t one-sided; it impacts both the therapist and the patient. If, for example, a patient complains about distressing OCD thoughts, therapists should not dismiss these thoughts as insignificant, as this undermines the patient’s challenging experiences.

Inverse psychological projection, including the self-directed form, has unfortunately become a widespread phenomenon in

today's society, observed in various everyday situations and social media interactions. This tendency is more likely to manifest in individuals whose ego is not satisfied.

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