

# TO DEVELOP PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES MEANS UNDERSTANDING SHADOW PROJECTION

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[Self-Care Tips](#)

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We all give and receive projection while parts of us live in shadow, every day of our lives.

Shadow refers to the parts of ourselves that are in the darkness, or that we are unconscious of.

Projection refers to the externalization (sending out) of the shadow—the unconscious aspects of yourself, such as positive or negative needs, feelings or ideas you are not aware of having.

Projection and shadow always involve judgment of yourself or others, and thus a sense of separation from those around you and from life itself. Ultimately, you want to drop judgment as soon as you notice it, as best you can.

The key is to bring it to your awareness, so you can [live your life from conscious choice](#) rather than being buffeted around, perhaps disappointed and frustrated, by blind, unrecognized projections—of both you and other people.

When we take the time and do the inner work to own and clear our projections while illuminating the things we are unaware of about ourselves, we are able to live more happily and peacefully—and to better embody therapeutic presence for clients.

## Shadow Projection

Projection is the externalization, or sending out, of unconscious aspects of yourself. These aspects include positive or negative needs, like the need for love or the need for control; unconscious feelings; and ideas you are not aware of having.

Judgment is a key component of projection, because the things we judge as being things that either attract or repel us are often formed at the unconscious level. What this means is our judgments often become our projections.

When we can recognize our judgments, we need not operate from them anymore.

I define projection as a particular perceptual lens on the world, a way of perceiving things in which you do not take responsibility for the origin of a belief or perception.

You might engage in shadow projection by projecting onto others your own [unrecognized desires, fears and motivations](#). For example, it is normal to project that everyone else experiences the world the way you do, even if you logically know this is not possible.

Part of each one of us automatically believes everyone else operates the same way we do, and for the same reasons.

A common example of projection is around the issue of lateness, such as someone being late for a commitment with you. Most of us tend to project onto others whatever lateness means to us.

If you are the kind of person who is only late when you don't want to be there for some reason, you might assume—project onto someone—that when a client is late for an appointment with you it is because he doesn't want to be there with you, or perhaps doesn't like you.

You might then respond by being irritated and short with the person, or hurt. You might assume the client is not being respectful of you. In this instance, you are projecting out onto the other person your unconscious reasons for his tardiness.

Notice that the projection, and its associated judgment, carries an internal charge with it and causes a feeling of separation.

You don't feel as connected to the person as you did before, or something doesn't feel right between you. The judgment and sense of separation can definitely impair your ability to hold a therapeutic presence for this person.

Your boundaries will not be as clear, either. So, first and foremost, you must recognize both that the projection is taking place, and own it as yours.

## Shadow

Psychiatrist [Carl Jung](#) defines the shadow as the parts of our personality we reject out of fear, ignorance, shame or lack of love. We unconsciously reject them because we find them unacceptable. We don't like them. They are unacceptable to our self-image, our identity and our ideal ego self.

Projection and shadow go hand in hand. We engage in shadow projection of those things that we are not aware of, those parts of ourselves that are in darkness.

For example, you may have unconscious envy or deep hatred, even though you consciously see yourself as a loving, magnanimous person who doesn't ever feel those darker feelings.

My friend told me a story about seeing herself as a kind and loving person, yet when her dog jerked her injured arm for the fourth time and caused her excruciating pain, she described the inner surge of rage and the urge to kick him—which immediately showed

her a huge discrepancy between how she felt in that moment and her identity as a kind, loving human being who would certainly never kick an animal.

If she were not conscious of all this, she would probably deny her rage, and project that part of her shadow side out onto the world around her.

This could look like judging anyone expressing anger, even appropriate outrage or anger. She might even project onto such a person that she is dangerous and needs to be rejected, avoided or punished.

Although she refrained from kicking her dog, she may feel the need to reinforce her ideal identity, saying to herself, "I am a saint; I'm such a good person. I don't have any anger.

Only really bad people have rage or anger." She would then judge herself as better than others in her world, because she wouldn't understand that the deeper parts of herself that responded with the unacceptable emotion of rage, of wanting to retaliate, is also a part of her.

When we can accept more of ourselves, the container of our being is larger; we have more choice about how we behave and can hold a wider and more accepting therapeutic presence for others.

There are many parts of yourself that your cultural, religious or family upbringing may have told you that you should not have. As a health care provider, there are many parts we may feel we are supposed to possess in order to be a good facilitator, and many parts we definitely do not want to admit to possessing.

A colleague of mine told me about asking a group of massage therapists whether any of their clients had ever been sexually attracted to them. Several people raised their hands and nodded.

Then he asked whether anyone in the group had ever been attracted to a client.

No one moved.

The shadow side in that group became glaringly obvious in that moment. It was not acceptable to admit they had ever felt sexual feelings in the treatment room, and yet there is nothing inherently wrong with being attracted to a client; in fact, it is normal at times.

The key issue is how to [maintain healthy boundaries](#) when this occurs, and the truth is that if we can't admit a feeling to ourselves, then we are more likely to get into unhealthy dynamics involving projection with our clients.

Our shadow side has the potential to destroy the intimacy in relationships, diminish our spirit and keep us from fulfilling our dreams. In our professional lives, it can impact the quality of our relationships with our clients.

This is particularly important in relationships where there is an inherent power differential

## Power Differentials

What we need to examine more closely is where damage can be inflicted unknowingly in a therapeutic situation, or any life interaction, when there is a power differential between you and the person you are projecting onto.

Such a scenario might occur between a health care provider and client; minister and parishioner; mentor and student; or parent and child—or in another relationship where one person is perceived to be of higher status.

In such a relationship, your projection—or perceptual lens through which you see the other person—may be believed by that person as well, without recognizing that it may not be the truth about who that person is in that moment.

This is particularly true if you tend to make your projections into pronouncements.

Examples of this are a physician who tells a patient he has six months to live; a massage therapist who announces that a client's shoulders are like bricks and wonders what the person has been doing to herself; or a psychotherapist who tells a client she's never seen a worse case of abuse.

A colleague of mine contributed some valuable insights about these situations as it relates to the dialoguing process in advanced CranioSacral Therapy.

He states that if we are too directive and make pronouncements—our truth, not theirs; therefore, a projection—about our intuitive hits regarding the truth of their healing process, several things can occur.

First, if your projection or pronouncement is incorrect and if the person's boundaries are healthy enough in that situation, she can reject our pronouncement and leave. But, this is highly unlikely, since there is [an inherent power differential](#) in a therapist/client relationship.

Clients come to you for your wisdom and care. They place trust in you and give you power to help them.

In the second scenario, you are very insightful or perhaps just lucky and you are actually correct about what you are saying about the person's healing process.

However, by making it in the form of a pronouncement (projection), you have now robbed the client of the opportunity to find his own answers and wisdom, thus disempowering him and increasing the power differential between you. (You, not the client, are now the one who holds all the answers and wisdom.)

The last scenario is that you are incorrect; you think you know exactly what is going on with the person, but you are wrong. (Your timing may be off or your imagery is not appropriate, or you are flat-out wrong.)

In that case, if you make a pronouncement, projecting onto the client and she believes you, then the client may begin to live out of your reality rather than her own.

## Clients' and Therapists' Shadow Projection

In all of the following examples, therapists recognized internal signals—limiting thoughts, charged sensations or feelings—and brought the projection to conscious awareness. They were then able to act responsibly rather than blindly.

The degree to which a massage therapist can have a strong therapeutic presence and healthy boundaries is dependent upon his or her ability to recognize personal projections and the projections of others, and to consciously practice walking a more illuminated route.

John is a dedicated massage therapist whose skills are well-seasoned. In most of his sessions, he feels confident and enthusiastic, yet when one client, Sarah, comes in for her bimonthly massage, John finds himself irritated and not really wanting to help her with her chronic pain.

Initially, he blames her for his irritation, telling himself, “She demands too much of me, and there is no way I will ever be able to meet her needs.” But as the weeks go by, his negative attitude about her leads him to wonder what is really going on.

John doesn’t feel that way about his other clients. Sarah’s pain is not really that different from that of others he treats.

Then he has an *aha* moment, realizing Sarah has the same tone of voice and manner as his controlling mother. With this realization, he sees he had been assuming Sarah was trying to control him with her detailed questions and requests.

He had projected onto her that her motives were controlling in nature. Once he realizes this, he begins to reclaim his projections and resolve his frustration in his sessions with her.

Client Sean comes in to see massage therapist Marianna with a lot of physical aches and pains, problems he wants someone else to solve for him. He has always felt as though life had given him a rough deal.

Unconsciously, he sees himself as a victim needing to be constantly rescued. He puts Marianna up on a pedestal as the therapist who is going to take care of him. He has projected onto her that she is all-knowing and can fix anything.

Initially, Marianna is excited to work with someone who needs her so much and has so much confidence in her. She has so much to give.

However, as time goes on, Marianna starts to experience the downside of this arrangement. Repeatedly, when Sean’s session hour is done, he pleads for “just five more minutes, and I am sure my neck will feel better.” Marianna starts to dread seeing him on the schedule.

She is buying Sean’s shadow projection about her being his savior, and it is a heavy load to carry—a load no one can live up to.

Once Marianna realizes her exhaustion is coming from accepting this role with him, she is able to begin the work of stepping down from his pedestal, handing him back the projection by helping him claim his own power to heal, and beginning a new relationship with him as a client.

Brittany finds herself smitten with her massage therapist, David. His nurturing touch fills such a gap in her life that she imagines what it would be like to have that touch every day in a relationship with him—and she fantasizes that he feels the same way about her, although she says nothing.

David notices that Brittany is super-friendly, and asks more questions than his other clients. He is an average-looking guy, albeit a little socially shy, so her warm attention feels wonderful to him.

He tells himself it would not be a problem to just have coffee with her occasionally and get to know each other better. (There are projections on both sides of this equation.)

David takes an ethics class online and realizes he is walking a slippery slope with Brittany. He calls and cancels the coffee they were about to share, and when she comes in the next time he lets her know clearly that he cannot establish a friendship with a client for ethical reasons. He has reclaimed his projection, leaving her free to reclaim hers.

Amber is a talented massage therapist with a successful practice. When the big-name physician who often refers clients to her calls for an appointment himself, she finds herself feeling something close to paralysis at the thought of massaging him.

She asks herself, “What if he does not like it? He knows so much more than I do.”

Amber is projecting onto him that his “greatness” dwarfs her skill sets and that he will judge her poorly.

As she reflects about the looming appointment, she realizes her limiting belief about not knowing enough and not being enough to massage him is false. She has a solid track record with the clients he sends to her.

The knot of tension in her midsection starts to melt as she realizes he is probably quite curious as to how she works. By the day of the appointment she is excited to meet him and her dread has disappeared completely.

## Be Present

Our job when holding a [good therapeutic presence](#) for someone else’s healing is to be present and help that person access his own wisdom from his own internal landscape and resources, not to project our version of reality onto him.



If we succeed, our clients become wiser, healthier human beings. We, too, learn and grow with each session. This is a win-win situation.

This article was drawn from Suzanne Scurlock-Durana, C.M.T., C.S.T.-D.'s "Full Body Presence: Grounding and Healthy Boundaries" course material. For more information on this course, visit [healingfromthecore.com](http://healingfromthecore.com).

### **About the Author:**

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