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Research Paper

Not a Cool Girl: Exploring Projective Mechanisms in Incidents of Sexual Violence

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ABSTRACT

Projective mechanisms are used to dispose the unwanted aspects of human psyche. This paper aims at exploring these mechanisms in the perpetrators of sexual violence. Additionally, it explores the impact of these mechanisms when used onto the victims. For this study, qualitative analysis of the interviews with survivors of sexual violence is carried out. Themes on the perception of the perpetrators, as well as the narratives of the survivors showed feelings of shame, anger, and violation in the survivor. Lack of accountability from the perpetrators is also a common theme. Delayed expression of anger from the survivors is expressed.

Keywords: *sexual violence, projection, projective identification, rape, pain, shame, India*

Humans hold tremendous capacity to block out the undesirable from their psyche. One such way to apply this is through projective mechanisms of projection and projective identification.

Projection is an ego defense that helps to dispose of the denied and perhaps rather unacceptable parts of oneself. "It is a mirror defense and it reflects more the perceiver than the perceived" (Laughlin, 1983). Malancharuvil (2004) further elaborated on projection as the first phase of forming an image of oneself with respect to the other, almost containing a transitory application. For the purpose of this paper, projection as an ego defense is adopted, or Malancharuvil's act of communication assuming the other (here: the victims of sexual violence) could be explored as perhaps victims holding more perceived power in nature. In contrast, the idea of locating the unwanted part of oneself in another person and possessing control over them reflects a central aspect of projective identification (Odgen, 1979). There is a lack of separation between the ego and the object in both these conditions. Although they appear similar in vernacular and in overt sight, these mechanisms are after all different from each other. Kernberg defines the disparity between them rooting in their interplay: projection occurs by the means of repression while projective identification occurs by the standards of splitting. He proposes (Kernberg, 1987) that a "developmental line leads from projective identification, which is based on an ego structure centered on splitting (primitive dissociation) as its essential defense, to projection, which is based on an ego structure

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centered on repression as a basic defense". Klein also noted that projective identification is developed earlier in the paranoid-schizoid position (1946) and projection is developed much later; despite continuing in varying degrees throughout life.

Through this paper, I explore these projective mechanisms led by the perpetrators of sexual violence. Freudian analysts have been ignorant at the forefront of realizing the motives behind rape, and sexual violence. The obsession with interpreting the victim's psyche deeming rape as being desired has been perpetrated in the literature time and again. John Forrester's (1991) paper 'Rape, Seduction, Psychoanalysis' argues that the discourse on rape is beyond the psychoanalytic realm as these are the matters handled separately in the legal context. "The silence of masculine sexuality, the refusal to investigate the pathology of sex offenders and indifference concerning the causes of rape" are within the scope of psychoanalysis but still lacking, points out Linda Burns (1998). Zosky (2003) writes, "One way that violent men (aggressor) may use the other to fill emotional needs is through the primitive defense of projective identification". As Klein stated that a part of the ego is split off and projected into the object in order to harm or protect the disavowed part, perhaps the perpetrator may dispose of their shame and fear onto the victim.

Brennan's interpretation provides a clearer picture at looking at these conflicts. In her book 'The Interpretation of the Flesh (1992)', she explains how the uncomfortable and dread-laden feelings such as shame and guilt are acted out in particular social contexts. It is essential for the perpetrators to survive on this projection that they force upon the victims. In this adjustment, most often women as well as gender and sexual minorities bear the brunt of the Other. Burns (1998) elaborates that the psyche of the victim will be terrorized and in pain, with the addition of strong negative feelings, rejection, and repulsion, and sometimes more positively anger.

I aim to probe the interplay of these projective mechanisms during an act of sexual violence on the survivors and victims; and as a result, the impact of the authentic emotional experience of the victim. My imagination is that it distances the victim from their pain and anger while pushing them onto an opposing journey of shame, guilt, humiliation, and fear.

For all intents and purposes, I use the definition by Indian Penal Code on sexual Assault/Violence. These include:
- Assault or criminal force on to a woman with intent to outrage her modesty
- Sexual Harassment
- Voyeurism
- Stalking
- Human Trafficking
- Rape

METHODOLOGY
Study Design and Approach:
A qualitative research of thematic analysis was decided while keeping in mind the subjective experience of the participants. An open-ended interview of each participant was taken that consisted of 8 questions. To verify the validity of the questions, they were approved by two researchers (including my guide) and further, a pilot was conducted.

Interview: The questions used for the interview are as follows:
Pilot:
1) Describe your reaction followed by the incident?
2) What were the emotions you experienced while you made sense of the incident?
3) What were the factors that helped you confide in someone if you did??
4) How did the perpetrator make you think/feel about the incident?
5) Many people who have gone through sexual assault report feelings of shame. It can be seen as feeling 'dirty', 'invisible', 'worthless', and 'wrong'. Do you agree?
6) Did you come in contact with your perpetrator again? If yes, how did it go?
7) Do you imagine facing your perpetrator? How would that be?
8) Describe your anger if any, that you may feel in your experience towards the perpetrator?

Modified for the main study:
1) Describe your initial reaction to the incident.
2) What were the emotions you experienced while you made sense of the incident?
3) What did the perpetrator make you believe before/during/after that incident?
4) If the perpetrator made you believe something, how far did it become an internal reality?
5) Many people who have gone through sexual assault report feelings of shame. It can be seen as feeling 'dirty', 'invisible', 'worthless', and 'wrong'. Do you agree?
6) Did you come in contact with your perpetrator again? If yes, how did it go?
7) Do you imagine facing your perpetrator? How would that be?
8) Describe your anger if any, that you may feel in your experience towards the perpetrator?

The interview process took about 30mins-1hour for each participant. Informed Consent was taken, and each interview was coded to maintain the confidentiality of the participant. The audio was kept with me, and some of the transcripts (without any identifying details) were shared with my guide.

Sample: Participants aged 18 and above residing in India who had gone through sexual violence were considered. Sexual Violence was defined under these conditions:
- Assault or criminal force on to a woman with intent to outrage her modesty
- Sexual Harassment
- Voyeurism
- Stalking
- Human Trafficking
- Rape

A total of 25 participants volunteered for the study ranging between 19-27 years. The gender identity of the participants was:
- Cisgender Women (88%)
- Non-Binary Women (8%)
- Cisgender Men (4%)

Analysis: Reflexive Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2014, 2019, 2020) was selected as the best analytical technique to provide a comprehensive understanding of the narratives of the participants. I used a mostly inductive methodology that involved a reflexive

open-coded procedure and prioritized meanings depending on the data. However, to ensure the themes were relevant to sexual violence and projective identification, some deductive analysis was also used.

Ethical Concerns: Given the sensitive nature of the data, codes were added to individual participants' names. These codes were used to set up a meeting and were also used in the transcripts. An alias is given instead of the code during the discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The themes that were formed during the analysis are from two areas: the projective mechanisms used by the perpetrators and the impact of these mechanisms on the survivor.

- *It is You, Not Me*

Due to the violent nature of abuse, oftentimes, the survivors are seen as the persecuting figures that disrupt the peace, more so if they try to question the abuse or show their discomfort towards it. Somers (2015) writes, "In characterizing the survivor as 'all bad', a broad interrogation of patriarchy is foreclosed, preserving a sense of society". She further mentions how this is a characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position, seeing the survivor as "all bad" or the one who has done wrong.

In some instances, while talking to the participants, I was told that they were seen as 'wrong' or the one who asked for it.

> "My perpetrator made me believe that it was me who wanted it when I did not… when I verbally did not give any consent… when I verbally said no. But my perpetrator made me believe that I wanted it. And that really did make me feel ashamed. And it really made me question a lot of things. It made me blame my own sense/self." (Anya, 22)

At other times, the perpetrators questioned the existence of the participant, calling one of them 'not a man' if they did not allow the perpetrator to carry on the abusive act, and even questioned the right of the participant to be at a public space.

> "When you say something and they have that much audacity to revert you in a way that you shouldn't travel in public transport because you already know like there are a lot of people around" (Amiya, 22)
> "You will not be a man" (baddie, 22)

- *It is all fun and games*

In cases of child abuse, it was shown that the perpetrators covered the abuse as 'simply games.' The narrative they apply is, if the child did not want it, they could have said 'no,' "projecting a mature assertive capacity to the child" points out Orlandini (2002).

> "one of my friend's family driver used to pick up and drop us to the tuition center, so, there have been days my friends were not going, it was just me who was going with him and coming back, so I think then was the thing when he tried, you know, maybe, like, I was really small, was like very young, basically, so we all used to be like, he used to make us play games in the car itself, so we could play *chuppan-chupai* (hide and seek) in the car, the seat, then he would touch inappropriately, so it started" (Sumati, 23)

Perhaps, the perpetrators' frustration and inadequacy due to which they perform the abuse is triggered; projective identification can be used as a means to dish out the unpleasant feelings

onto someone, there may be the fantasy of perhaps, having a good time. But, since, the 'violent' act only serves as a temporary relief, the perpetrators project the fantasy of a 'good time' on the survivor. The wish is to make the shame-ridden act seem 'calmer', 'acceptable', and as mentioned it should perhaps reflect that they are having a 'good time'.

> "He would just say that it was like a form of game and stuff here is be like, oh, we are just playing oh, umm. Because I… it was not like I really understood that, I think. I vaguely remember being like, confused...., and he is like, 'No, it is okay. We are just playing or like, oh, it is okay. We are just having a good time, things like that.'" (Ayesha, 19)

- *Shush*

"Any consideration of projective identification has to address the question of non-verbal communication" (Wright, 2004). A lot of intricacies are exchanged through just mannerisms, and gestures. Nielsen (2019) says that Projective Identification is often "mysterious", a lot is passed through, a lot is accepted, even before someone sees it.

In certain cases, it was revealed by the participants that the perpetrators laughed at them, or showed no response to their discomfort. This may result in the deepening of the belief: nothing is wrong with the survivors.

> "The perpetrator did not have to do anything because… Well, I was just a kid, and so they counted on me, keeping quiet." (Sushma, 25)
> "In some instances, the perpetrator really believed that uhh, I am… There is nothing like nothing to feel inappropriate about it. Like, it is absolutely normal because like I said, when it is on public transport, you know that other people can see it. And when they are not doing anything, and this person is still continuing, to well, touch you inappropriately… Isn't that nonverbally sending the signal that people do not care and you are exaggerating it in your head?" (Sushma, 25)
> "I have tried to make one of them understand through text messages, and they did not even have the basic courtesy to even reply to those messages." (Anya, 22)

Nielsen (2019) elaborates, "it is often because the influencing force is nonverbal—written between the lines—and is accomplished through inaction. This makes sense because the absence of emotional support tends to exacerbate insecurity, loneliness, or narcissistic rage. And a relative lack of worry in a dangerous situation tends to increase anxiety in others." In a few cases, I could see that the survivor is gaslighted yet it is uncertain to me as well as the survivor the exact cause of it.

In the conversation with a participant, she mentioned an older relative sending inappropriate sexually charged messages to her. The messages carried an almost inquisitive, curious tone deafening the lewd intention coming from a person about 10 years older than her.

> "And the person directed it in such a way that you know, they directed it in a way as if like, you know, it was completely normal and like, you know, as if he is not asking anything inappropriate. As if he is not discussing anything that is inappropriate. And this is something that people absolutely discussed. They were trying to gaslight me and I was actually pretty gaslighted because I… I was like, well, okay. And I kept answering some of the questions. And then later on I realized, you know, I was like, this does not sound very… I do not like this, just feels very inappropriate." (Sushma,25)

- *Urge to believe in my reality*

Projective Identification serves four main purposes: "communication, curiosity, containment-seeking, and control or coercion of others" (Braddock, 2018). The control of others is attained through force (verbal or non-verbal) and then maintained in two distinct ways. One is by avoiding any perceived threats to the reality, and the other is by repeating the act again and again so as to confuse the victim. In some cases, it was shown that the perpetrator tried to abuse the survivor again, or perhaps stalk them for years, or follow them on social media till they accept the advances. This act of "repetition" ensures that the survivor is in the projective cycle.

A survivor who was groped and stared at just outside their exam hall was groped again by the perpetrator in front of their father.

> "And while going in again to the exam hall, he did it once again like this. Like, while leaving, like, literally, my father was just in front of me. It was very like not obvious, but he did it. And to me, it was just like that feeling of like being powerless in front of daddy and just absolutely out of control of the situation." (Asifa, 23)

> "I had to literally block him from everywhere. After I blocked him from his one number on WhatsApp, people usually have two numbers now these days so he made WhatsApp on a different number and then messaged me, I had to block him from there then I had to block him from Telegram also from his first number... And from even LinkedIn also he messaged me I had to block him from there. So, for two years this thing went on (...) he also followed me on Zomato (...) he sent those (the survivor's) nudes and he said like if you want me to delete them, please meet me once, meet me once and then (said) a lot of shitty things" (Sanchi, 25)

- *Accountability?*

In all the incidents barring two, there is a lack of accountability from the perpetrators. Moreover, there was no indication of awareness or guilt towards the violence. Lack of accountability shows the dispersal of shame towards the survivor. The perpetrator either believes that they hold no part in the violence, or that the survivor is living in the wrong reality.

One such perpetrator assaulted the survivor whilst on hard drugs. When she called them out, they denied any allegations put up by her. She tried to make them understand again thinking they might get a clear picture now that they were sober.

> "When they were sober and were conscious enough to understand what I wanted to say, they did not accept what I was saying, did not want to accept their actions…and…yeah, they tried putting themselves on me again…" (Riddhi, 23)

> "... most of the perpetrators that have had access to me just brushed it off. It is a pattern that I had to really deal with. And, umm, I was angry because it is the norm…Is that is what supposed to happen…but no. It is not supposed to happen, they are just cowards, they do not have a spine in them, and they did what they did it was a normal thing for them, and they left me scarred." (Riddhi, 23)

> In one case, the survivor called the perpetrator and his family to the police station. Even then, there did not seem to be remorse from the perpetrator's side.

> "Of course, he had to, but it was not because he felt guilty of something or did something wrong. It was just because he wanted to save his ass and did not want a sexual harassment FIR on him. (...) His father was feeling more sad and guilty than him." (Sanchi, 25)

In another incident, the survivor filed a complaint to the perpetrator's university. The university did not take any action at first and later asked the perpetrator to write an apology.

> "The perpetrator was asked to write an apology letter, and that apology letter was like... In that, he basically wrote, but he thinks he did not do anything. But if I think I did something, then he is sorry for that." (Anya, 22)

This perhaps causes the displacement of shame on the survivors. They feel the need to be correct, to prevent the act, almost as if they themselves conjured it.

> "So, yes, I do agree that there is always a sense of shame that comes in. And I feel for me it is also because I feel I could not do anything. And that makes me feel ashamed of myself, that I just... at that moment, I could not do anything." (Anya, 22)

> "And sometimes it is also because I start, you know, identifying or analyzing if there is something I did wrong or if… if there is something that I did that led to that. These things make me feel ashamed." (Anya, 22)

- *Messed Up Milestones*

In talking to one of the survivors, they mentioned that since their rape, they have been hypervigilant to their environment. They chuckled and proclaimed that this sense of vigilance is a 'messed up milestone' they have finally achieved. Along with shame, there is fear that these survivors shared. In very few cases, the survivors majorly felt fear, not even anger or shame. They were still very much in the process of surviving the incident. It becomes of course a question of curiosity: why is there so much fear in the survivors and so less of it in the perpetrators?

> "But so, we live on the eighth floor, and he lives on the ninth floor. So, every time I saw the lift, coming down from the ninth floor, I would just take the stairs, I'll be like, I will happily climb eight… eight floors." (Ayesha, 19)

Another survivor was happy to be in a healthy relationship, but still very much in fear that her past might hamper her ability to make new comfortable experiences.

> "And I was like, very, like worried about it, possibly, like, you know, flashbacks, like something happening. And so, I told him, like, you know, listen, there is a possibility of this happening. And, you know, I just wanted to be prepared, like, if I have a reaction is not because of you is because of my past." (Ayesha, 19)

> "So, the abuser they have such a mentality okay if someone is wearing revealing dresses that it is an invitation or they are not good people or they are meant to be harassed or something like that. So, for a short period of time… for a few weeks, I did not wear shorts…" (Sanchi, 25)

- *Imprints*

The act of sexual violence brings with it a lot of pain. The impact on some of the survivors has been mentioned below. It is to be noted that this impact can be due to violence, projection, or both. In a few cases, the distinction can be made, however, the same can't be said for others.

> "I feel like at that point, ironically itself, I was an adult, I was conscious entirely and umm, an adult brain really does imprint a lot. My adult brain back then imprinted this quite deeply." (Riddhi, 23)

> "Even if it's 50 years down the line, I am still affected by the mere mention of what they have done to me" (Riddhi, 23)

> "And, you know, there came a point of time when I learned this the... Perpetrator, he and I shared a birthday, and I started despising my birthday because, like I said, in my

case, it was somebody I knew. And... Every time on my birthday, I am seeing people putting up statuses… Whatapp statuses of happy birthday for him. Every time I saw his face it just got me... Like it just made me feel very triggered. And yeah, it was like I, at a point of time, I just stopped watching statuses on my birthday. (...) When I learned, I learned that initially, I just felt like… I started despising my own birthday." (Sushma, 25)

Some of the things the perpetrators said, or the things they did, carried forward in the perspective that was shaped of the survivors. The whole act, what they say, what they do builds the foundation of how these survivors will see their future dynamics.

A survivor shared how he started to perceive his rape as almost enjoyable at times due to the conditioning of his perpetrator. He thought that those cruel acts done by him (the perpetrator) were 'common', so he tried the same in his future relationships until reality hit him.

> "So, you know, it left a mark on me that I even asked my ex to maybe you know, can we do this because this is very common, right? Then they told me 'Are you mad? Who told you this? What friends are you having who did this? What is going on with you?' So, then I started to realize maybe something is going on with me I mean, I mean, if it's that common, why are they reacting like this" (baddie, 22)

> "I kind of held this twisted perception that oh, maybe I did something to, I wouldn't say deserve it, but like, oh, maybe I wanted it like maybe somewhere I was enjoying what is happening to me, which is why I let it go on for so long." (Ayesha, 19)

The survivor mentioned how at times, he cannot separate the identity that is authentic to him and the identity formulated by his perpetrator.

> "Well, I believe a huge part of my personality was shaped by these events. And I'm not sure that even they are mine... you know what I mean? I mean, I do not really… I cannot really figure out that if this is what I would do or this is how I was conditioned because of those incidents." (baddie, 22)

- ***Delay in anger***

While almost all participants expressed anger, even murderous rage towards the perpetrators, it was shown that in most cases, this anger was delayed. The anger was felt only when the survivors could process the whole incident, or when they figured out that they did not do anything wrong.

> "What I was just getting at was that while earlier I would feel helpless, off late, I have just been feeling extremely, extremely angry when it happens." (Asifa, 23)

One of the perpetrators went around and told the survivor's friends/neighbors that he was giving 'practical sex education'. He denied the violence and even told the survivor that she was overreacting.

> "And but then when I confronted him, and he had that same disgusting response, and then when I found out that he has been telling other people in the apart(ment)... flat, like a lot of other people that it was practical sex education, or whatever, whatever the fuck that was. It made me so mad. Like I just, it was then I think that that hatred really started like, nine years of weird guilt, sadness, and fear and forgiveness instantly turned into this hatred against him." (Ayesha, 19)

> "But slowly, slowly, it builds, it's not immediate anger, after two or three days it builds, then peaks." (Sanchi, 25)

> "I think what really happens is initially I feel all the shame and I feel that probably this is my fault in some way or the other and I start analyzing it. But when I have realized that, no, it's actually not my fault, then I start feeling anger... an anger towards the perpetrator and, and wanting to take some action and wanting the perpetrator to suffer as much as I did." (Anya, 22)

A couple of survivors even reported no feelings of anger towards the perpetrator. The major consensus was that they do not wish to expend that energy feeling angry at the perpetrator.

> "Not at all. Not at all. I do not feel the rage, the aggressiveness, I do not feel anything. (...) I do not really like to put my energy into such people, such experiences which are not good for me. And which will bring, you know, a sense of discomfort to me. So, I never really think about them. So that goes there, no anger, no rage, no kindness, no mercy, nothing. (baddie, 22)

CONCLUSION

The paper 'Not a Cool Girl' is a critique on the Cool Girl trope. The Cool Girl is all that her man needs. She is ladylike but free, does all the work without cribbing, and is opinionated and bubbly given that she limits it to her head. She is all that a partner wants and much more. Oftentimes, these cool girls are sewn from the lens of a male gaze, offering everything without expecting anything in return. They are bright and sharp, but the moment they use their traits for themselves, their identity is ambushed.

The paper intends to not only unfold the projective mechanisms of these perpetrators but to also look at the projection of our society toward the marginalized. The vessel that they put their shame onto is filled, and the hope is to disperse the accountability where it is supposed to be.

The results of the paper are somewhat in line with the hypothesis. The presence of projective mechanisms is found in certain cases, and absent in some. However, the displacement of shame on the survivor is a repeated theme. The projective mechanisms are found to be disabling and confusing for the survivors, and there was successful introjection of shame in a couple of cases too. The intent of the projections used seemed to belittle the pain of the survivors and perhaps helped the perpetrators keep away from their shame and pain as well.

The impact on the emotional journey of the survivors is varied. They reported all kinds of emotions ranging from shock, fear, and terror, to anger, and murderous rage. In some incidents, the survivors were left with shock and fear and were still processing the trauma of the sexual abuse. In these instances, it could be seen that the survivors had not had the safety and comfort to explore the violations they went through. Almost all survivors noted anger as an afterthought, an emotion that took a while for them to feel. This can be attributed to the projective mechanisms being in play, pulling the survivors towards fear and shame, away from their pain and anger.

Limitations

As mentioned by many researchers, projective mechanisms, especially projective identification is studied almost always in a clinic due to the tangling, merged, and confusing nature of it. The study, however, is not carried out in a clinical setting, and thus, may fail to draw the true picture of what projection may look like. Moreover, it could be seen that there is an impact of these projections that are felt, but to point them out was harder. Perhaps, that could be due to my limitation as a researcher, the lack of probing of participants, or perhaps the need to study this concept on the perpetrators.

Additionally, the impact of projective mechanisms is difficult to characterize individually as the contents of sexual violence are so deep, and traumatizing. These impacts could be due to gaslighting, projection, physical violence, and the forced sexual act itself.

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