Shadows, Conflict, and the Mediator

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This article discusses a theory of mediator psychological growth specifically focusing on Carl Jung’s concept (1954) of the Shadow. The nature and development of the Shadow are outlined, with particular attention to the mechanism of projection, applied to the perspectives of both the individual and the group. The importance of the mediator uncovering and owning his or her Shadow material is underscored, along with some strategies for doing so. This article responds to Bowling and Hoffman’s third stage of mediator development (2003), where the mediator is committed to gaining greater awareness of how personal qualities influence the mediation process.

In the days and weeks following September 11, 2001, President Bush defined the war of terrorism with his now famous statement that “you’re either for us or against us.” This statement could be translated into “You’re either one of the good guys or one of the bad guys,” or “You’re either good or you’re evil.” As most mediators know, conflict is rarely this simple, and statements such as these often betray the psychological complexity of many conflicts. It is hard to interpret some conflicts and undertake effective action because we are often drawing on unidentified and repressed psychological material and actively using it to restructure or make sense of the conflict according to our own perspective. This article contends that when we are strongly repulsed by another’s beliefs or actions, or when we tenaciously align ourselves with one party and not the other in a conflict, we may be in the presence of what Carl Jung characterized as the Shadow. This notion also has implications for mediators who, in certain situations, find themselves easily working with some disputants and reacting negatively to others.
I begin with a brief discussion of the impact of the intervener, introduce Carl Jung, move to a description of the characteristics of a Shadow and its partner projection, and then outline a method for meeting and owning your Shadow, discussing implications and offering concluding remarks. There are two tasks to keep in mind as you read. First, as I describe different features of the Shadow, reflect on how you might interpret this concept in your own personal life. Second, look for applications in your professional practice through an expanded understanding of how conflict is created and resolved and what your role is in the process. Throughout the article, you will find “reflection questions” intended to bridge the concepts presented in this article with your personal and professional lives.

The Impact of the Intervener

The conflict literature, training manuals, and education programs abound with such terms as “third party neutral” or the “neutrality of the mediator.” Annexed from the physical sciences, these terms locate the mediator outside the intervention process, maintaining an artificial boundary between him or her and the disputants. This view assumes that the intervener’s own psychological makeup does not significantly affect the mediation or its outcomes. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth than this long-standing fiction; the intervener’s fingerprints are apparent throughout the intervention process from beginning to end. The myth of intervener neutrality is promoted by those practitioners in the conflict resolution field who believe in the existence of an objective conflict reality that we simply describe, without contributing to its character or interpretation.

Mediators are inevitably called on to create a relationship with the parties involved in a dispute. Yet our personal qualities and sense of self influence the nature of this relationship and have an impact on the parties’ ability to negotiate effectively with one another (Goodenough, 2000). Following this thread, Bowling and Hoffman (2003) note that even the subtlest aspects of the intervener’s presence influence the choreography of an intervention process. Dispensing with the modernist ideal of an objective and neutral facilitator, they pose critical questions that all interveners should reflect on:

- I, as the mediator, am about to become a part of this conflict. How are the others involved reacting to me?
- How do I generally react to this kind of conflict in my own life?
What qualities am I bringing into the midst of this conflict that will support its resolution?

Bowling and Hoffman (2003) highlight the need for a critical understanding of the intervention process, one taking into account how the mediator contributes to it. He or she constructs a story of the dispute that reflects not only what the disputants say but also the meanings ascribed to their words and behavior. Thus, the authors emphasize, the personal qualities of the mediator affect his or her ability to reconstruct an understanding of the disputants’ accounts of the conflict.


Bowling and Hoffman (2003) outline three stages of intervener development. In the first stage, mediators focus on developing techniques such as active listening, reframing, and helping parties generate options; in the second stage, the mediator works toward developing a deeper understanding of why and how mediation operates. Finally, in the third stage the mediator develops a growing awareness of how her or his own qualities influence the mediation process. Bowling and Hoffman emphasize that in the third stage the mediator learns to take responsibility for her or his personal growth. This article is written for those mediators who have attained this level of understanding, those courageous enough to undertake the perilous journey into the underworld of their personal unconscious; it is for those practitioners who are willing to meet and integrate abandoned aspects of their psychological self—their Shadow.

Carl Jung

Carl Jung was Sigmund Freud’s student, colleague, friend, and later foe. Although Jung expended a great deal of energy attempting to integrate his research with Freud’s, his conceptualization of the unconscious differed
substantially from that of his teacher (Woodruff, 1996). Jung came to understand the unconscious as the other half of the self; it was the key to wholeness and, potentially, the guiding principle of life (Jung, 1954).

Jung’s approach to therapy was not so much focused as Freud’s was on “fixing up” people’s neuroses; rather, he held that, by turning their attention to the unconscious, they could begin to relate to the numinous—a term that refers to the spiritual dimensions of our lives. He wrote that “this approach to the numinous is the real therapy, and insomuch as you attain the numinous, you are released from the curse of pathology” (1973a, p. 377). In Jungian psychology the ego is the center of consciousness, while the self is the center of the total personality, which includes the unconscious and the ego.

In simple terms, Jung understood the psyche to be made up of three layers (there are also many sublayers that are beyond the scope of this discussion). First, the top layer comprises the ego and the persona, the public face that embodies our social role and mediates between the ego and society. Second, underlying the first layer is the personal unconscious, which contains drives and desires, forgotten memories, and painful ideas that remain hidden from consciousness. Jung referred to this as the superficial layer of the unconscious. Finally, the deepest and most extensive area of the psyche is the collective unconscious, a point of contact between the individual and transpersonal life forces. The individual is affected by historical and cultural developments and in turn contributes to the collective unconscious of the group, culture, and world (Woodruff, 1996). This investigation of the mediator’s role focuses on the Shadow, a major aspect of the personal unconscious that is fundamental to adequately understanding what the mediator brings to a conflict situation.

I recognize that there are many interpretations of Jung’s work, including his discussion of the Shadow. For instance, there is some confusion in the literature as to whether the Shadow relates only to the personal unconscious or can sometimes operate in the collective sphere (McLynn, 1996). However, my intention is to apply key aspects of the Shadow concept to conflict resolution practice; it is not to debate the wider issues of Jungian theory.

The Shadow

The Jungian concept of the Shadow refers to the dark, covert, repressed side of the ego complex; it is the unlit side of our personality, a mythical name for all within us which we cannot directly know. It is the long bag
that we drag behind us, heavy with the parts of ourselves that our parents, friends, and community disapproved of (Bly, 1989). To help us understand the nature of the Shadow, Bly asks us to visualize a two-year-old child with the potential for a full, 360-degree personality, who, in order to keep the love of parents, family, and friends, attempts over time to disown those qualities that others refuse to accept in him or her. As a consequence, degree by degree, aspects of the child’s potential become disconnected from the ego and are stuffed into this bag of submerged and hidden attributes. Children quickly learn that they can best survive by presenting a bright and shining face to their parents, hiding those instinctive urges, feelings, and thoughts that they are told are unacceptable. Although we may have repressed this material, it remains very much alive within us, struggling for attention and acknowledgment. We spend the first twenty years of life stuffing parts of ourselves into the bag, and then we spend the rest of our lives trying to get them out again (Bly, 1989).

Your persona mediates between the ego and the outer world and anchors the everyday, conscious image you present to others; it is a compromise between the individual’s and society’s visions of what a person should be and, consequently, represents only a portion of everything that each of us really is. There are people who really do believe they are the role that they play—under intense social pressure the ego can identify with the persona, although there is a cost to be paid for this neurotic inflation (McLynn, 1996).

Rejected and censured by the surrounding world, the balance of who we are remains in the unconscious, in the shadows, hungry, restless, and waiting to be acknowledged. We are light and darkness, both sides of Robert Louis Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The more pleasant, light side is our daily persona, Dr. Jekyll, but it is balanced by a darker, night-time self, a Mr. Hyde, who remains hidden most of the time. The negative emotions that we experience—rage, jealousy, shame, resentment, lust, greed, and murderous tendencies—lie concealed just beneath the surface, masked by our public persona. We are more likely to engage in destructive behaviors and impulses if we remain unaware of our Shadows. Awareness brings the possibility of acceptance and integration, thereby supporting our psychological growth. For the most part, our personal Shadow remains untamed and unexplored territory for most of us. We have banished into Shadow all of the feelings and capacities that are rejected by our ego, thus contributing to the hidden power of the dark side of our personality (Abrams and Zweig, 1991). The Shadow is a hidden, inferior personality, a secondary personality...
(Miller, 2001), with its own contents, autonomous thoughts, ideas, images, and value judgments that are similar to the superior, conscious personality. The Shadow is the trait, thought, or thing that a person has no wish to be (Jung, 1954). One of the aims of Jungian therapy is to bring both the Shadow and the persona to consciousness so that they can be integrated (McLynn, 1996). Although we might think that the Shadow is only negative, this is not always true. As discussed later in this article, “golden Shadow” refers to the repressed positive qualities or attributes that we may wish to integrate into our personality.

**Reflection Question**

• Consider what your virtues are. Where does the opposite of your virtues manifest in your life (adapted from Hollis, 2003)?

**Projection**

One way we can expose our Shadow is by taking note of when we react intensely to a behavior or quality, such as laziness or stupidity that we attribute to an individual or a group. The Shadow is not necessarily always equated with strong feelings; rather, it is uncovered through critical reflection on the potential relationship between certain types of situations and people in them, to the strong feelings experienced by the intervener. This reflective practice helps to distinguish between the healthy judgment of a situation or person and the presence of Shadow aspects of ourselves.

When our reactions overpower us with great disgust or high regard, this may be our own Shadow showing. Projection is the unconscious transfer of one’s own conflicting, dark part-personalities onto another person. We *project* by attributing a quality to someone else in an unconscious effort to banish it from ourselves, to keep ourselves from seeing it within (Casement, 2003). Projection is the unconscious referencing of impulses and feelings to people and objects outside of ourselves (Jung, 1973b). Jung thought of projection as a psychological adjustment mechanism where the “in here” becomes “out there”; it is the process whereby an individual blurs the distinction between subjective and objective experience (Harms, 1946). It is our propensity to see in others what we least like to see in ourselves. Anything we are unwilling or unable to face within ourselves we then run the risk of running into head on in the world (Kopp, 1980). Projection can also be thought of as a way of connecting with the world, for by shooting
a magic arrow toward an intended receiver we discover in others lost fragments of ourselves (von Franz, 1980).

In their article “Running from the Shadow: Psychological Distancing from Others to Deny Characteristics People Fear in Themselves,” Schimel, Greenberg, Arndt, Pyszczynski, and O’Mahen (2000) describe another psychological response to shadow activity whereby people actively defend themselves against their shadow through a process they describe as psychological distancing, whereby the individual denies the potential for the behavior or characteristic he or she despises or is repulsed by. When we see ourselves as different from those who harbor characteristics we fear in ourselves, we deny our potential for the dreaded characteristic—enabling us to say “I would never do that sort of thing; I am not like them.”

In an unguarded moment during the mediation process, the mediator’s hidden self may appear. Like an illegitimate child seeking the denying parent’s approval, your usually disowned self moves to the outside to claim its rightful place in your life, surfacing suddenly in one of your sessions (Kopp, 1980). During the dispute resolution process, the mediator may encounter in the disputants something she or he has denied within herself or himself; negative feelings that the mediator’s conscious self holds toward the hidden self have been projected onto one of the disputants, and, because the Shadow is unconscious and unfamiliar, it is often projected in a distorted way.

Reflection Questions

• What repulses you about some of the stories that your clients tell you?
• What really annoys you about some of the clients that you work with?
• Which of your colleagues do you idolize or strongly align your thinking and practice with?

Collective Shadow and Projection

Shadows are not restricted to the individual; there are collective Shadows as well. Many aspects of our personal Shadows have been defined by the values of a group to which we belong and with which we identify. In our work
settings, families, or religious communities there are specific, unacceptable behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs we attribute to another group, so that we can tell ourselves, “We don’t do that kind of thing; they do.” These are the hidden aspects of the self that are stored away in a collective Shadow and subsequently projected onto others, sometimes with devastating results (Kopp, 1980).

A nation’s collective Shadow material may be acted out brutally in repression, war, massacre, or genocide, or it may also appear as missionary work that seeks to “civilize” the natives, as in Canada’s residential schools and reserve allocation systems (Kremer and Rothberg, 1999). Early settlers in Canada often saw First Nation people as savages; they were seen as inferior and dirty. The Puritans, believing that God was paving the way for them to settle the land, infected Native Americans with diseases that killed them (Miller, 2001). Ongoing dismal socioeconomic conditions and a shorter life span for Canada’s First Nations people are a continuing testament to the power of our collective Shadow.

It is often those living at the margins of society, the underprivileged and the oppressed, on whom we project our collective Shadow (Hillman, 1962). In projecting, the group exonerates itself by denying the evil, greed, intolerance, and filth that may exist within its collective Shadow. As long as we band together to repress our unacknowledged Shadow energy, we will treat other individuals, groups, and nations brutally, operating under the illusion that we are ridding the world of evil, when in fact we are the source of that evil (Ogren, 1998).

If we are curious about what is in our collective Shadow or “state bag,” we need only listen closely to the language of today’s leaders as they describe fighting the war on terrorism, goodness winning over evil, right prevailing over wrong (Bly, 1989). We search for the goodness in ourselves by finding the evil in others, and through projection we can justify taking actions that might otherwise be against our principles, while holding in contempt those who try to apply the same principles to us in return. Perhaps one of our deepest fears is the loss of our enemies, for without them we run the risk of losing what they provide: our sense of peace, security, and freedom (Ogren, 1998).

Group Shadow projection can lead to scapegoating, which Girard describes as

that strange process through which two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for
whatever ails, disturbs or frightens the scapegoaters. They feel relieved of their tensions and they coalesce into a more harmonious group. They now have a single purpose, which is to prevent the scapegoat from harming them, by expelling and destroying him.

Girard, in Redekop (2002, p. 85)

The collective Shadow and its projection can involve us in bloody wars and bring devastating consequences to all variety of conflicts, often in times when we are most complacent about peace and determined in our own sense of righteousness (Kremer and Rothberg, 1999). Through the projection of our collective darkness, we commit violence and oppress others; it is the denial of responsibility for doing this that allows us to glimpse the activated collective Shadow.

**Reflection Questions**

- Where do you see the collective Shadow and its projection in your research or practice?
- How can we understand the “war on terror” from the perspective of collective Shadow projection?

**Meeting and Owning Our Shadow**

You and your Shadow make up a complete self. Although your Shadow may contain some destructive material, such as hate, greed, and lust, it also embodies lost vitality and creative potential. The Shadow includes “everything you ever wanted to know about yourself but were afraid to ask” (Kopp, 1980, p. 32). Although our Shadow can be as dark as hell, it can often be illuminating. The latter is our golden Shadow, which holds a wealth of undeveloped and unexpressed potential (Palmer, 1990). Jung believed that the Shadow was 90 percent pure gold; in repressing the Shadow, we lose touch with aspects of our creative potential, the positive traits that were placed into the Shadow because they were not acknowledged, either when we were young or later in life. The Shadow is not intrinsically evil; it is the ego’s continuing refusal to accept the entire personality that contributes more to evil than does the Shadow (Miller, 2001).

Rather than continuing to repress Shadow material, we can bring the things that disgust us to consciousness and constructively integrate them.
into ourselves, thereby enlarging our potential for growth. This is the role of Shadow work: meeting and owning our Shadow, meeting and owning our lost self, integrating light and darkness (Powers, 1998). When our egocentric defense barriers fall, we may be aghast at what we recognize in ourselves. Contrary to belief, one does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light but instead by making the darkness conscious, often a disagreeable process and therefore not popular (Jung, 1954). By accepting this dialectic within us, we can create a place in our lives where the opposite poles of the psyche can come together (Tarnas, 1993).

We can meet our Shadows in a variety of ways. English psychoanalyst Molly Tuby (1963) suggests six ways in which we manifest our Shadow material every day:

1. In our exaggerated feelings about others
2. In negative feedback from others who serve as our mirrors
3. In those interactions in which we continuously have the same troubling effect on several people
4. In our impulsive and inadvertent acts
5. In situations in which we are humiliated
6. In our exaggerated anger about other people’s faults

Meeting our Shadow is a demanding, sometimes painful process of listening to the cryptic messages that emerge from the depths of the unconscious. It means listening carefully to those around us; both our lovers and our enemies are sources of valuable information about how we treat and regard others. Exploring the Shadow means creating space in our lives where we can watch our actions, thoughts, and emotions as we go about our daily routine, freely allowing the tumultuous inner turmoil of feelings and thoughts to move to the surface. It means slowing the pace of our lives and being willing to take responsibility for what is truly ours and not “out there.” This process may necessitate breaking old habits and fostering new ones. Yet if we fail to heed the call, we will remain unaware and continue to develop only a fraction of our true possibilities (Tuby, 1963).

Miller (2001) cites some suggestions for tracking our Shadow:

1. Soliciting feedback from others as to how they perceive us
2. Uncovering the content of our projections

...
3. Examining our “slips” of tongue and behavior
4. Considering our humor and our identifications

Often the process of reflecting on and greeting our lost self begins in earnest with the middle passage. This is a time in which, Jung believed, we individuate, become fully human, and enter our “second” adulthood. We spend the first part of our adult years fulfilling the roles required by our community: becoming responsible, building a career, marrying and having children, buying a house, and other “adult” activities. This stage is actually a form of extended childhood in which our dependency has gone partially underground (Hollis, 1993). Hollis believes that conforming to these prescribed roles provides fulfillment and “still[s] the terrors of the unknown” (p. 25). We believe our identity is confirmed through the roles we assume. From this perspective, our roles define who we are but leave us at the mercy of the external world, which imposes its own ideals on our construction of the self. The middle passage often begins with attempting to answer questions such as (Hollis, 1993):

- Who am I apart from my role?
- What is really important to me beyond the role that I am playing?
- Is this all there is to life?

If we don’t heed the call to go deeper, both in our practice and in life, we risk living a diminished existence, unaware of the potential within us. The only pathway to our unconscious, to our unlived possibilities, is through the Shadow, which, when travelled, helps us realize our soul (Whitmont, 1985). In defining the meaning of soul, Hillman writes:

Its meaning is best given by its context. . . . Words long associated with the soul amplify it further: mind, spirit, heart, life, warmth, humanness, personality, intentionality, essence, innermost purpose, emotion, quality, virtue, morality, sin, wisdom, death, God. A soul is said to be troubled, old, disembodied, immortal, lost, innocent, inspired. Eyes are said to be soulless by showing no mercy. The soul has been imaged as . . . given by God and thus divine, as conscience, as a multiplicity and as a unity in diversity, as a harmony, as fluid, as fire, as dynamic energy, and so on. . . . The search for soul leads always into the “depths.”

Wilber (1995) gives easy advice to alert us to the presence of our Shadow in that if a person in the environment informs us, then we probably aren’t projecting; however, if this person affects us in some way, then there’s a good chance that we are the victim of our Shadow.

**Reflection Question**

- What colleagues do you find yourself reacting to or irritated with?

**Implications for Practice**

Jung wrote that “we cannot live in the afternoon of life according to the program of life’s morning, . . . for what in the morning was true will at evening become a lie” (1972, p. 236). Jung believed that being unwilling to adopt a new way of seeing in the mature stage of life results in damage to our souls.

All those involved in the mediation process, especially the intervener, share in its construction. By acknowledging our Shadow and integrating it into the mediation experience, we as mediators can deepen and enrich its creative dynamics. We can do this from two perspectives: first, by increasing our knowledge about conflict theory and its application, and second by increasing our own psychological health through depth work. Greeting and owning our Shadow is an essential step to understanding how we influence the choreography of the conflict resolution process and its outcomes. Exploring life more deeply is not an easy process; however, if we are courageous enough to undertake this journey, we will free more of our creative energies, the means to true artistry in our practice.

Jung understood the power of the personal and collective Shadow and offered hope to individuals willing to shoulder responsibility for their own unacknowledged darkness. He wrote:

> If you imagine someone who is brave enough to withdraw all his own projections, then you get an individual who is conscious of a pretty thick shadow. Such a man has saddled himself with new problems and conflicts. He has become a serious problem to himself, as he is now unable to say they do this, or that they are wrong, and they must be fought against. . . . Such a man knows that whatever is wrong in the world is in himself, and if he only learns to deal with his own Shadow he has done something real for the world. He has succeeded in shouldering at least
Jung’s words are a powerful call to those practitioners who have the courage to explore the darkness of their psyches, searching for undiscovered aspects of themselves that may be limiting their professional growth. This is the essence of reflective practice, a critical inquiry that questions who we are and how we think, feel, and act when mediating disputes. Practitioners must recognize that conflict is a complex problem that cannot be understood by any single-minded approach. Depth approaches such as Shadow work contribute to building an integral theory (Wilber, 2000a, 2000b) of conflict. In reowning our Shadow, we also engage in profound work for peace, as we become aware of the myriad ways in which we disown, deny, and project our hatred, cruelty, and greed onto others.

In reestablishing contact with our Shadow, we renew our creativity and life’s energy because, according to Jung, as well as learning from our successes, our pain, depression, and humiliation are also seedbeds for our continued growth. The Shadow is not a garbage pile but a treasure house of unrealized energy that could bring new vitality to our practice (Green, 1988).

Beneath our world of reason, another lies buried. Restless and waiting to be acknowledged, Jung believed that it is critical for all humanity to investigate this unknown world. Tracking and owning our Shadow is a deeply reflective process that asks us to embrace the Beast within us, and in doing so deepen our beauty. Realizing this relationship between dark and light, and fearing that psychoanalysis might exorcise his demons, Rainer Maria Rilke (1985) said he feared that if his devils left him his angels would take flight. It takes courage to accept this heroic journey of descent into the underworld of our psyche, for we may be astounded at the gap between who we think we are and who we can become.

Perhaps we can understand our current world events—the war in Iraq, the seemingly endless cycles of civilian deaths in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the carnage throughout Africa—not as an unmitigated series of disasters but rather as an evolutionary catalyst that pushes all of us toward new heights of psychological growth and maturation. We are all called on to become more of who we are and to contribute as much as we can to constructive conflict engagement. From this perspective, we hold both a vision of the future and a motive for working toward it (Walsh, 1993).
Reflection Questions

• Where are you stuck in your professional life?
• In your professional growth, where do you repeatedly undermine yourself and flee from your best, riskiest self?
• What are the fears blocking your professional growth (adapted from Hollis, 1993)?

Zweig and Abrams (2001) understood this journey well when they said, “We have in all-naiveté forgotten that beneath our world of reason another lies buried. I do not know what humanity will still have to undergo before it dares to admit this” (p. xxiii). They believed that to protect us from human evil, which these mass, unconscious forces connect, we have only one weapon: greater individual awareness.

Conclusion

The Shadow is not evil; it is a necessary part of the possibility of our wholeness as mediators and conflict management practitioners. It is all that you do not wish to be, and are repulsed by; remaining blind to your Shadow is a betrayal of your selfhood. In the reluctance to acknowledge that what I do not wish to be is me, we continue the evasion of becoming whole. If you believe that you do not have a Shadow, you remain asleep and unconscious to your own capacity of doing evil to yourself or others (Hollis, 2003).

Bowling and Hoffman (2003) identified the notion that the mediator’s ability to positively influence the parties depends on the personal qualities he or she brings into the room with the disputants. Embracing our Shadow is an aspect of Bowling and Hoffman’s third stage of mediator development, where the mediator is committed to gaining greater awareness of how personal qualities have an impact on the mediation process.

In this article, I have discussed my belief that aspects of the mediation process are constructed and that, far from being a neutral third party, the mediator does influence the intervention process and its outcomes. To emphasize both the positive and negative dimensions of this position, I have introduced a theory of psychological growth, specifically focusing on Carl Jung’s concept of the Shadow. The nature and development of the Shadow were outlined, with particular attention to the mechanism of projection, applied to the perspectives of both the individual and the group.
The importance of meeting and owning your Shadow material was underscored, along with some strategies for doing so. Finally, I stressed the implications of the Shadow for the mediator's conflict practice, emphasizing the importance of Shadow work if we are to realize our full potential for spiritual growth and lasting, effective conflict outcomes.

References


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*Conflict Resolution Quarterly* • DOI: 10.1002/crq