

The Paranoid Character

By Nancy McWilliams

Notes by Michael Mervosh for the PSEN US Training Program



- *The essence of paranoid personality structure is the habit of dealing with one's felt negative qualities by disavowing and projecting them; the disowned attributes feel like external threats.*
- *Paranoia intrinsically involves experiencing what is inside as if it were happening outside the self.*

For practitioners, it is worth noting that knowledge of this particular character type is often quite limited.

A paranoid person has to be in fairly deep trouble before he or she seeks (or is brought in for) psychological help. Higher functioning paranoid characters tend to avoid psychotherapy unless they are in severe emotional pain or are causing significant upset to others.

People with normal-level paranoid tendencies often seek out political roles, where their disposition to oppose themselves to forces they see as evil or threatening can find ready expression.

Keep in mind that some people who appear paranoid are actually being stalked or persecuted, or else realistically imperiled. Also, the off-putting qualities of many paranoid people make them natural targets for mistreatment.

Contrastingly, other types of individuals who are in fact quite paranoid do not appear to be so on the surface. It will not be obvious, so others will fail to discern that there is something internally driven about their pre-occupations.



DRIVE, AFFECT AND TEMPERAMENT IN PARANOIA

Because they see the sources of their suffering as outside themselves, paranoid people in the more disturbed range are likely to be more dangerous to others than to themselves.

- *Affectively, paranoid people struggle not only with anger, resentment, vindictiveness and other visibly hostile feelings, they also suffer overwhelmingly from fear.*

Silvan Tomkins regarded the paranoid stance as a combination of fear and shame.

The kind of fear suffered by the paranoid character has long been referred to as ‘*annihilation anxiety*’, and anyone who has experienced this level of dread knows how terrifying it is.



The Paranoid Character vs The Narcissistic Character

As for shame, this affect is as great a menace to the paranoid character as it is to the narcissistic character.

The narcissistic character suffers from shame if they feel ‘unmasked’.

The paranoid character, contrastingly, may use denial and projection so powerfully that no sense of shame remains accessible within the self. Their energies are spent on foiling the efforts of those who are seen as bent on humiliating and shaming them.

People with narcissistic structures are afraid of revealing their inadequacies; those with paranoid structures are afraid of other people’s malevolence.

For the paranoid character, their focus on the assumed motives of others rather than what is happening internally can be a formidable obstacle to therapy.

Like the narcissistic character, paranoid people are vulnerable to envy. Unlike them, they handle it projectively. Resentment and jealousy can easily darken their lives.



Frequently, behind the paranoid’s jealousy is an unconscious yearning for closeness with a person of the same sex. Because such longings may be unconsciously confused with erotic homosexuality, which can frighten straight males, these wishes for closeness are abhorred and denied.

- *Paranoid people are also profoundly burdened with guilt, a feeling that may be unacknowledged and projected in the same way that shame is.*

This unbearable burden of unconscious guilt is another feature of their psyche that makes this character so hard to help – they live in terror that when the therapist *really* gets to know them, he or she will be shocked by all their sins and depravities, and will reject or punish them for their crimes.

- *The paranoid character is chronically warding off this humiliation, transforming any sense of culpability in the self into dangers that threaten from outside.*

They unconsciously expect to be found out, and they transform this fear into constant, exhausting efforts to discern the 'real' evil intent behind anyone else's behavior toward them.



DEFENSIVE AND ADAPTIVE PROCESSES IN PARNOIA

- *Projection, and disavowal of what is projected, dominate the psyche of the paranoid character.*

For those who are have paranoid dynamics at the psychotic end of the spectrum, upsetting parts of the self are projected and fully believed to be 'out there', no matter how crazy the projections may seem to others.

They do not find ways of making their beliefs fir with conventional notions of reality; they may be quite convinced that they are the only ones in the world who see the threat.

*For those who are have paranoid dynamics in the borderline range of the spectrum, they project in such a way that those on whom disowned attitudes are projected are subtly provoked to feel those attitudes. This is *projective identification*.*

These people will work to make what is projected 'fit' their target.

For those who are have paranoid dynamics at the neurotic end of the spectrum, internal issues are projected in a potentially ego-alien way. They will project, but also have some observing part of the self that eventually will be capable, in the context of a reliable relationship, of acknowledging the externalized contents of their mind as projections.



- *A common projection of the paranoid mind is to feel unnecessarily hated.*

The need of a paranoid person to handle upsetting feelings projectively involves the use of an unusual degree of denial – and its close relative, reaction formation.

Everyone projects; indeed, the universal disposition toward projection is the basis for *transference*.

Example of unconscious operation of reaction formation:

- *I don't love you, I hate you.*

Added to with example of unconscious operation of projection:

- *I don't hate you, you hate me.*

Implicit in these formulations is the paranoid character's terror of experiencing normal loving feelings, presumably because prior attachment relationships were toxic.

- *Any kind of longing feels unbearably dangerous to a paranoid character.*

Again, a significant difficulty is working with paranoid people concerns how long and convoluted is the distance between their basic affects and their defensive handling of them.



RELATIONAL PATTERNS IN THE PARANOID CHARACTER

Children who grow up paranoid have suffered severed insults to their sense of efficacy; they have repeatedly felt overpowered and humiliated.

Criticism, capricious punishment, adults who cannot be pleased, and utter mortification are common in the backgrounds of the paranoid character.

- *Another source of paranoid personality organization is unmanageable anxiety in a primary caregiver.*

These types of caregivers tend to be chronically nervous, and have catastrophic thinking when they are unable to contain their anxiety. They can be well-meaning, but incapable of providing comfort to their children.

Therefore, children of these mothers grow up learning to console themselves only by drastic transformations of their basic feelings.



How A Paranoid Mind Gets Shaped

- First, both reality and the person's normal emotional reactions to it are disconfirmed, instilling fear and shame rather than a sense of being understood.
- Second, denial and projection are modeled by significant others.
- Third, primitive omnipotent fantasies are reinforced, laying the foundation for a diffuse and overwhelming guilt.

- Finally, the interaction creates additional anger while resolving none of the original distress, thus magnifying the person's confusion about basic feelings and perceptions.
- The person ends up feeling even more aggravated than at the start.
- These mind-muddling transactions get replicated repeatedly in the adult relationships of paranoid characters.

If a child's primary source of knowledge is a caregiver who is deeply confused and primitively defended, who – in desperate attempts to feel safe or important – uses words not to express honest feelings but to manipulate, the child's subsequent human relations cannot be unaffected.

The struggle for a paranoid person to understand what is 'really going on' is comprehensible in this light, as is the bewilderment, helplessness, and estrangement that beset people dealing with paranoid friends and relatives.

If a child had had any significant caregiver capable of relating in a confirming way, their personality would probably not have developed in a paranoid direction. The tendency of paranoid people to lash out rather than endure the anxiety of passively awaiting inevitable punishment is another well-known and unfortunate cost of this kind of early life parenting.

The presence of a frightening parent and the absence of people who can help the child process the resulting feelings (except by making them worse) is a common breeding ground for paranoia.



THE PARANOID SELF

The main polarity of the self-representations of the paranoid character is an impotent, humiliated and despised image of the self vs. an omnipotent, vindicated, triumphant one.

The tension between these two self-images is what suffuses their subjective world. Cruelly, neither position affords any solace: the paranoid self will move between the fear of abuse and contempt, and a crushing guilt.

The weak side of this polarity is evident in the degree of fear with which the paranoid character chronically lives. They never feel fully safe and spend inordinate energy scanning the environment for dangers.

The grandiose side is evident in their 'ideas of reference' – everything that happens has something to do with them personally.

- *It can be startling to hear the emergence of the paranoid character's organizing conviction that everything that happens to them reflects the significance to other people of their personal existence.*

The megalomania of the paranoid character, whether conscious or unconscious, burdens them with unbearable guilt. If one is omnipotent, then all kinds of terrible things is one's fault.

- *When an unbearable attitude is denied and projected, the consequences can be grave.*



A connection between paranoia and disavowed homosexual pre-occupations has been noted for some time by clinicians.

Research indicates that the more a man is aroused by homosexual imagery, the more homophobic he tends to be.

The paranoid character tends to regard the idea of same-sex attraction as upsetting to a degree that is scarcely imaginable to those who are not paranoid.

The homophobia of some paranoid characters can be truly menacing.

At the core of the self of the paranoid character is a profound sense of emotional isolation, and need for 'consensual validation' from a friend.

The main way in which paranoid people try to enhance their self-esteem is through exerting effective power against authorities and other people of importance.

Experiences of vindication and triumph give them a relieving (but fleeting) sense of both safety and moral rectitude.

The dreaded litigiousness of paranoid individuals derives from this need to challenge and defeat the persecutory parent.



TRANSFERENCE AND COUNTER-TRANSFERENCE WITH THE PARANOID CHARACTER

- *Transference in most paranoid clients is swift, intense, and often negative.*

The therapist is mostly viewed as potentially disconfirming and humiliating, when not being projected as a savior.

Clients with paranoid tendencies tend to strike clinicians as grim, humorless, and poised to criticize.

- *Counter-transference is usually either anxious or hostile.*

In the less common instance of being regarded as a savior, it may elicit feelings in the therapist of being 'benevolently grandiose'.

- *Therapists of paranoid clients often find themselves consciously feeling the aspect of an emotional reaction that the client has exiled from consciousness.*

For example, the client may be full of hostility, but the therapist feels the fear against which the hostility is a defense.

There is a counter-transference tendency in most therapists to 'set the client straight' about the unrealistic nature of whatever danger the client believes he or she is in.

- *The therapist's powerlessness to give much immediate help to a person who is so unhappy and suspicious is probably the earliest and most intimidating barrier to establishing the kind of relationship that can eventually offer relief.*



THERAPEUTIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE DIAGNOSIS OF PARANOID PERSONALITY

The first challenge a therapist faces with a paranoid character is creating a solid working alliance.

Establishing this working alliance is particularly important with paranoid characters because of their difficulty trusting.

There has to be some initial embrace by the client of the possibility that the therapist is well intentioned and competent.

This takes some considerable forbearance from the therapist. It also takes a capacity for comfort talking about the negative transference, and conveying the degree of hatred and suspicion aimed at the clinician is to be expected.

- *The therapist's unflustered acceptance of intense hostility fosters the client's sense of safety from retribution, mitigates fear that hatred destroys, and exemplifies how aspects of the self that the client has regarded as evil are simply ordinary human qualities.*

Effective work with paranoid clients differs substantially from 'standard' psychotherapy practices. Acceptance of one's full humanity must be accomplished differently.

- *Interpretations that go from 'surface to depth' is usually impossible with paranoid clients because so many radical transformations of their original feelings have preceded their currently manifested pre-occupations.*

'Examining resistance before addressing the content' is also usually ill-fated with a paranoid client.

Commenting on the actions or statements made by a paranoid client only makes that client feel judged or scrutinized, as if they are being put under a microscope.

The conventional aspects of depth work – exploring rather than answering questions, bringing up aspects of a person's behavior that may be expressing unconscious or withheld feeling, calling attention to unconscious body postures or movements – all intended to increase a client's access to internal material and to support their courage to talk more openly – will boomerang with a paranoid character.



How to best help the paranoid character?

1. Call on a sense of humor. An attitude of self-mockery, amusement with the world's irrationalities, and other non-belittling forms of wit are useful. Humor is indispensable in therapy – especially with paranoid clients – because jokes are a time-honored way to discharge aggression safely.

Nothing relieves both client and therapist more than glimpses of light behind the gloomy storm cloud that occupies a paranoid person's mind.

The best way to set the stage for mutual enjoyment of humor is to laugh at one's own foibles, habits, and mistakes. A paranoid client misses nothing; no defect in the therapist is safe from their scrutiny.

Of course, one stands ready to apologize if one's wit is mistaken for ridicule, but the idea that work with hypersensitive clients must be conducted in an atmosphere of oppressive seriousness seems to me unnecessarily fussy and somewhat patronizing.

Gentle forms of teasing, in an effort to make omnipotent fantasies ego alien, can be quite helpful to a paranoid character.

Humor, especially a willingness to laugh at one's self, is therapeutic in that represents to the client the therapist's ability to be 'real', rather than playing a role and pursuing a secret game plan.

The histories of paranoid characters are often so bereft of basic authenticity that the therapist's direct emotional honesty comes as a revelation about how people can relate to each other.

It's best to be quite forthcoming with paranoid clients. This means responding to their questions directly and honestly.

When the emerging content of the paranoid character is respectfully addressed, he or she becomes more rather than less willing to look at the underlying concerns represented in it.



2. The therapist can 'go under' or 'side-step' the complex defenses and into the affects against which it has been erected.

It is startling to see how fast a paranoid rant can disappear if the therapist simply lets it run its course, avoiding all temptations to deconstruct a convoluted defensive process, and then engages empathically with the disowned, projected feelings from which the angry preoccupation originally sprang.

- *Often the best cue to the feeling being defended against is one's countertransference.*

Underneath the pervasive hostility is often profound feelings of fear and helplessness.



3. The therapist can help the client identify what has happened in their recent experience to upset them. Such triggers often involve separation, failure, or – paradoxically – success.

Failures are humiliating; successes involve omnipotent guilt and fears of envious attack.

The practitioner must always resist the urge to confront paranoid ruminations, instead commenting on how the client may be underestimating how bothered he or she is by something mentioned in passing, previously in the session.

Educating people to notice their states of arousal and to look for triggers often preempts the paranoid process altogether, especially if one can tap into the underlying grief and bear gentle witness to the client's pain, the paranoia may simply evaporate.

- *One should avoid direct confrontation of the content of a paranoid idea.*

Paranoid characters are acutely perceptive about emotion and attitude; where they get mixed up is on the level of interpretation of the meaning of their preoccupations.

If the paranoid character senses that someone is trying to 'pretty up' intentions that are suspect or distorted, they will definitely become more anxious.

When a therapist has an observation to make, it is best that it is stated matter of factly, as if it had the tone of a 'throw away' line, so that the client is free to take it up or leave it alone.



4. The therapist can make repeated distinctions between thoughts and actions, holding up dark fantasies in the client as examples of the remarkable, admirable, creative perversity of human nature.

- *The therapist's capacity to feel pleasure in hostility, greed, lust, and similar less-than-stellar tendencies without acting them out helps the client to reduce fears of an out-of-control, evil core.*

The practitioner must keep going beyond interpretations about the motives behind darker feelings and fantasies, to the recommendation that one *enjoy* them, is a particularly important dimension of work with the paranoid character.

Without this aspect of the therapy, clients can get the idea that the purpose of therapy is to get them to expose such feelings and be humiliated, or to help them purge themselves of these feelings, rather than to embrace them together as a part of the human condition.

The paranoid character must sometimes sort out a lifetime of confusion about fantasy and reality.



5. The practitioner must be hyper-attentive to boundaries.

The paranoid character is perpetually worried that the therapist will step out of role and use them for some end unrelated to their psychological needs.

Consistency is critical to a paranoid person's sense of security; inconsistency stimulates fantasies that wishes have too much power.

Exactly what the individual therapist's boundaries are matters less than how reliably they are observed.

It is much more therapeutic for a paranoid person to rage and grieve about the limits of the relationship than to worry that the therapist can actually be seduced or frightened out of his or her customary stance.

- *There is also the risk of evoking pseudo-erotic transference storms in the paranoid character.*

Same-sex therapists may have to be even more carefully professional than opposite-sex ones, due to the vulnerability of many paranoid individuals to homosexual panic.

Regardless, any practitioner may suddenly find themselves to be the target of an intense, sexualized hunger or rage.

- *The combination of extreme psychological deprivation and cognitive confusion (affection with sex, thoughts with action, inside with outside) often produces eroticized misunderstandings and fears.*

The best that a practitioner can do is to restore the therapeutic frame, tolerate the outburst, normalize the feelings behind the eruption, and differentiate between those feelings and the behavioral limits that make psychotherapy possible.



6. It is critical that one convey both personal strength and unequivocal frankness to the paranoid client.

The paranoid client's greatest worry in a therapy relationship is that their evil inner processes will injure or destroy the therapist. They need to know that the person working with them is stronger than their fantasies.

What often matters more than what is said to a paranoid person is how confidently, forthrightly, and fearlessly the therapist delivers the message.

Most people who have written about the actual experience of doing therapy with the paranoid character have stressed *respect, integrity, tact, and patience* on the part of the practitioner.

Because of their excruciating sensitivity to insult and threat, it is not possible to treat the paranoid character without some debacles.

Periodically, the therapist will be made into a monster – called 'malevolent transformations' – and the client will suddenly experience the therapist as dangerous or corrupt.

Sometimes the therapeutic work seems like an endless exercise in damage control.

In the short term, one has to tolerate a protracted feeling of standing alone, since clients with paranoid psyches are not inclined to confirm, by verbal acknowledgement or visible appreciation, the therapist's efforts in the service of understanding.



THE PARANOID VS THE OBSESSIVE CHARACTER

Obsessive people share with paranoid individuals a sensitivity to issues of justice and rules, a rigidity and denial around 'softer' emotions, a pre-occupation with issues of control, a vulnerability to shame, and a penchant for righteous indignation.

They also scrutinize details and may misunderstand the big picture because of their fixation on minutia.

But these two characters differ in the role that humiliation plays in their histories and sensitivities. The obsessive is afraid of being controlled, but lacks the paranoid's fear of physical harm and emotional mortification.

Obsessive characters are more cooperative with therapy, and therapists do not experience the same level of anxiety when working with them, as opposed to the paranoid character.

- *Typical depth work approaches work well with obsessive characters, but not with the paranoid character.*

SUMMARY

The paranoid character is deeply object-related. The main threat to long-term attachment with the paranoid character is not a lack of feeling for others, but rather experiences of betrayal.

In fact, they are capable of cutting off a relationship of many years duration when they feel wronged.

Remember that the paranoid character relies heavily on *projection* to cope with their inner conflicts and confusions.

The paranoid's sense of self alternates between helpless vulnerability and omnipotent destructiveness, with ancillary pre-occupations resulting from a core fragility in identity and self-esteem.