



# Jung and the Shadow Self

## Carl Gustav Jung

Carl Gustav Jung was born in Switzerland in 1875, took a medical degree and became a psychiatrist. He was known for his work on schizophrenia.

Having read some of the work of Sigmund Freud, Jung wrote to him, and the two men began an exchange of letters that lasted several years, before they finally met in 1907. The meeting marked the beginning of a close association that lasted over six years. Jung became part of a weekly discussion group – the Wednesday Psychological Society – that met at Freud’s home. The group, which also included Alfred Adler and Otto Rank, evolved to become the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society – of which Jung was the first president (in 1911).

Jung disagreed with Freud’s belief that neurosis had a sexual basis, and the two men ended up falling out about this difference of opinion. Strickland (2001, p. 348) writes: ‘Jung developed his own system of psychoanalysis, which he called analytical psychology, that reflected his interest in symbolism, mythology and spirituality.’

## Levels of Psyche

Jung asserted that the psyche (individual personality) functions on three levels:

- the conscious
- the personal unconscious
- the collective unconscious.

According to Jung, the collective unconscious ‘gathers together the experiences of previous generations and even animal ancestors, preserving traces of humanity’s evolutionary development over time’ (Strickland, 2001, p. 348).

## Archetypes

The collective unconscious includes archetypes, which are ‘primordial images, inherited dispositions, blueprints for psychological behaviour and portrayals of instincts’ (Feltham and Dryden, 1993, p. 11).

One such Jungian archetype is the shadow, ‘which refers to the dark, disowned, threatening part of the self’ (Feltham and Dryden, 1993, p. 176). The shadow is thought to represent the animal instincts within us as humans. Jung is said to have referred to the shadow as ‘the thing a person has no wish to be’.

## How the Shadow Affects Us

Because the shadow is a part of us that we don’t like to accept that we have, it is common for people to deny its existence. Yet the shadow is not intrinsically negative: its contents depend on each person’s perspective on life, and to what extent they have developed self-acceptance.

Blundell (2017) gives the following example of how the shadow can therefore vary between different individuals: **‘So while for one person their shadow might just contain such classic elements as** sadness, rage, laziness, and cruelty, you might also hide your personal power, your independence, or your emotional sensitivity.’

## Projection

Because the shadow is hard to accept, ‘it is commonly observed that clients seek to deny their shadow and frequently project it, or aspects of it, on to others’ (Feltham and Dryden, 1993, p. 176). Projection is a psychological process that involves attributing unacceptable thoughts, feelings, traits or behaviours to others that are actually your own characteristics.

Projection is a defence mechanism, protecting the individual from a perceived threat – and so reducing anxiety and conflict. In other words, projection is based on the belief that the best form of defence is attack.

Feltham and Dryden (1993, p. 176) write: ‘It is sometimes speculated that the “cleaner and brighter” people or institutions appear, the more likely it is that a shadow aspect is being concealed and/or projected into others.’

## Benefits of Facing the Shadow

While people may have a strong desire to get rid of their shadow, this is impossible. In fact, there can actually be benefits in looking at your shadow, with Blundell (2017) observing: ‘Your shadow is something that can indeed offer many gifts of insight and personal power, should you dare to understand it ... **When we recognise and face our shadow, we can become more whole and balanced.**’

And Blundell (2017) gives the following examples of how getting to know and accepting our shadow can be helpful:

- Acknowledging and understanding our anger can allow us to set better boundaries.
- Facing our sadness can free us to feel greater happiness too, widening our emotional ‘bandwidth’.
- Accepting our own shadow can make us more understanding of others’ perceived faults, which can improve our relationships.

Jung also argued that the shadow is connected to creativity, so that becoming more familiar with our shadow can boost our creativity. Moreover, repressing the shadow can lead to difficulties, including projection.

## Working with the Shadow

Feltham and Dryden (1993, p. 176) describe the aim of shadow work as follows: ‘Counsellors and clients may approach the shadow with an attitude that changes from judgement to acceptance and integration.’

Because the shadow is naturally unconscious, personal-development work is required to begin to bring it into awareness. Indeed, a significant part of psychodynamic therapy

involves working with the client to explore their responses and to bring their unconscious selves into conscious awareness. Carl Jung called this process 'individuation'.

If you can be aware of when you or a client is projecting, you can gain an insight into their underlying fears and perceived vulnerabilities. This can be highly developmental.

## Techniques for Engaging with the Shadow

Ways to access your shadow are:

- having personal counselling, particularly Jungian psychoanalysis
- journaling
- exploring your dreams
- thinking about what qualities you dislike in other people: these may well be present in you.

It is best to do shadow work on yourself only when you are feeling psychologically resilient, as it is important to be able to recognise your strengths at the same time.

## References

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Strickland, B. ed. (2001). *The Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Group.