An Introduction to Social Psychology
Splitting and Projection

Dr Helen Lucey:
Splitting is one of the earliest and most primitive psychic defence mechanisms and really it's about splitting the world and the self into either all good or all bad, so the objects are perceived as either all good or all bad. It's one of the defence mechanisms that we employ in the earliest days of lives really, to cope with a kind of very uncertain environment.

Ann Phoenix:
Whenever we think of people in not complex, not nuanced ways, but as one thing or another, good or bad, then we're doing splitting.

Dr Helen Lucey:
It's not something that's just confined to infants, splitting is a psychic mechanism, kind of carries on throughout of our lives really.

Ann Phoenix:
The concept of splitting is really helpful in social research because you can often see that people idealise one group of people or one person and denigrate others, and for what seems not necessarily good reasons. So that the concept of splitting can give you one way of accounting for what's going on.

Dr Helen Lucey:
Projection is a psychic defence mechanism that's useful in defending us from difficult knowledge that we'd rather really not know about ourselves. And those might be kind of thoughts or feelings or attributes of the self that set up conflicts. And here I'm referring to things like hatred or envy, greed, weakness or dependence or incompetence, stupidity, or unacceptable desires. In order to unconsciously defend ourselves against the anxiety that that knowledge about the self could produce, we can project, literally expel those parts of the self into an object that's kind of over there.

Now that object could be a person, but it could just as easily be a thing or a place or even a political party or an ethnic group, a racial group, or a whole country. When they're placed out of our way then we can punish them and revile them safely, because now they belong to somebody else.

Ann Phoenix:
It is actually also possible to project nice qualities into people. Some people cannot take notions of themselves being really good at something or nice qualities, they can't stand praise for example. And they might project those qualities also into other people and see other people as ideal. But it's quite common to project very bad qualities into other people. And for social psychoanalytic research we need to be aware of the concept so that we can see when people's accounts are not straight forward because they frequently aren't, but are affected for example, by these twin processes of splitting and projection.