

Object Relations Theory

A History

In the beginning there was Freud – the father of all things psychoanalytic... including TA. Freud's idea was drive theory based on instinct – libido – life force energy and Thanatos the death drive.



Then along came Melanie Klein... The mother of object relations.

She looks like a lovely mother ...

Klein's idea was that these two forces create conflict within the child – pre-birth even... this conflict is then projected outwards onto the mother and all “objects / part objects” (people or parts of people).

The child splits the two sides of this conflict into good / bad and projects them onto objects – creating good / bad objects which are then interacted with and so then re-introjected... creating internalised good / bad split objects leading to an ongoing struggle between good and bad... Between loving preservative and hateful destructive feelings.



<https://melanie-klein-trust.org.uk/timeline/1945-1960/>

Melanie Klein with her Granddaughter, Diana in 1945

As a transactional analyst, I am thinking of the protocol and the conflicts, unforgettable, yet unrememberable that are understood as type 3 impasses. Klein described the developmental phases around which the child organises their sense of self, however, I am sure that her names for these periods must at least in part be a projection from Klein, although in the photos she looks engaged and lovely, although I am not sure what the little girl is thinking! Is this a reflection of the splitting process?

It seems to me, that when there is a loving, empathically attuned mother, their relationship can quickly develop to form a secure attachment, then the world is full of beauty, milk and love, alongside the struggles, the shock of child-birth in the newness of life. Another, problem with these descriptions is that they contain strange concepts – the baby splits mother into good / bad objects – and then can reconnect to the mother as a whole. These ideas may be interesting metaphors when attempting to explain adult dysfunctions, but they do not fit with more recent research observations regarding the development of infants – see Allun Schore's, Daniel Stern's work, for example, and while challenging the ideas, surely, we can think of a better term for relationships between people beyond objectification? On a personal level I can confirm I do not regret choosing to train in TA rather than continue with the plans to train in psychoanalysis.

- a. **Paranoid** –the first months of life: the world is full of malevolent bad objects caused by the pain of separation of child-birth, loss of intrauterine security. Klein describes the sucking / biting of the part object breast in aggressive violent terms.
- b. **Depressive – 4 – 12 months.** The child re-establishes the mother as a whole object – the child begins to see that good and bad flow from the same person. At the same time the child begins to experience them-selves as both good / bad. This then leads to the formation of depressive anxiety as the child is afraid of harming the mother... the child trades the destructive urges in the first phase to the depressive anxiety and guilt in this stage. The positive aspect of this is the child is developing the capacity for empathy. Empathy in turn leads to the capacity for reparation which in turn leads to the possibility of relatedness based on loving preservative experiences.



W R D Fairbairn – The father of object relations theory - introduced the concept that the ultimate goal of the human condition is the formation of meaningful human relationships.

Fairbairn's ideas were based the belief that the primary developmental task is to move from infantile dependency through a transitional phase into mature dependency (Inter-dependency). It is the failure to make this transition successfully that is experienced as neuroses.

Splitting according to Fairbairn was the infant's psychological mechanism used to deal with the inconsistent and unsatisfactory world (mother). For the most part the mother is experienced as good. However, the child also experiences the negative "bad" – these two parts are then spit in order to allow the child to maintain the dependence on mother without feeling constantly threatened.

The result is an internal splitting or good / Ideal object and bad internal objects which are directly related to the gratifying and rewarding and ungratifying aspects of mother.

The ungratifying or bad object can be either of two forms.

1. Exciting object – relating to a teasing / seductive mother object - resulting in a child who chronically feels frustrated and let down.
2. Rejecting object – relating to a hostile rejecting mother object. The child feels unloved and unwanted and feels chronically angry.

These bad objects in combination with the good object give rise to a corresponding tri partite division of the infant's representational world, which he called 3 ego states:

- **Infantile libidinal ego state** – Always thirsting but never satisfied. The child dominated by this ego state becomes frustrated and deprived.
- **Antilibidinal ego state** – Hateful and vengeful, rails against the denial it has experienced. Yearning for love and acceptance and union it believes it deserves and yet is dominated by the ever-present fear that it is unlovable and unwanted. Children dominated by this ego state are filled with rage and feel hateful most of the time.

- **Central ego state: derived from the ideal ego** - This is the only part connected to the parts of mother that were once gratifying. The central ego results in conforming behaviours and the other two ego states are then split off. The child is now available for relationship. However, this splitting leaves the child's inner world fragmented and forms the foundation for psychopathology and the bad objects are experienced only as inner experiences of frustration / self-denigration and persecution.

These splitting mechanisms then lead to the clinging of infantile dependency as the child fears separation because of the loss of contact and the fear of abandonment. The child does all it can to avoid abandonment.

Klein sees bad objects being formed as a result of the infant's violent urges being projected onto the parent figure / mother and then re-introjected.

Fairbairn sees bad objects being formed as a result of the internalisation of the depriving / frustrating / rejecting / hostile mother.



Otto Kernberg: The origins of severe psychopathology are lodged in the deficient or distorted object relations that have become a part of the client's inner world.

He calls the essence of the relationship the "bipolar interpersonal representation" which is constructed by 3 components:

1. Self – other experiences
2. An image of the other
3. Affective colouring

These various representations are then metabolised to form the foundations of the child's personality.

Projection and projective identification:

Projection is the imagining that another object is a certain way; for example, a person may project that another is angry... this is regardless of what the other person is actually experiences and does not need any kind of response. The target might well never know.

The process of projective identification, Ogden 1982, describes projective identification as how the client induces either a feeling state in the therapist or projects a split off part of themselves that they cannot experience themselves. The way in which one person makes use of another person to experience and contain an aspect of themselves.

In the therapeutic process the therapist accepts these induced feelings and split off parts - the therapist task is to then metabolize the experience - containing it and making meaning from it... The client can then re-integrate the metabolised feeling as their own.

People who rely on projective identification engage in a subtle and powerful forms of manipulation leading to the induction.