

The Creation of Paired Internal Relationships, The Early Super-Ego

[Note: From here on, both in this section and throughout the website, you will see the word “object” used in the context of “object relationship,” “internal objects,” “good or bad objects,” “part-object,” etc. This use of the word “object” is not the same as a “thing,” which would strip the referent of its human qualities. Instead, this usage is a remnant of Freud’s original reference to “instincts,” which had “a source, an aim, and an object.” So in this context, “objects” always refer to people, not things.]

Introduction:

Every mental health professional begins his or her training using awareness of his or her own feelings and thoughts as a template for imagining what the personality of someone else must be like. If this student is empathic and psychologically minded, he may be fairly adept at recognizing the feelings of the other person, which is a definite plus in mental health work. But the real difficulty begins when this budding therapist tries to picture the unconscious inner world of the patient and the structures from which those feelings emanate.

When I first began my psychiatric residency, I was a diligent student trying to observe every form of mental structure with the ardor of a dedicated bird watcher recording his “sightings.” I knew that I had a sense of “self,” and I knew that I had internal states left over from my relationship to my parents. I had a general understanding of the abstraction of a “harsh superego.” However, I was struggling to understand the concept of “internal objects” that I was finding in the Kleinian literature and how they were manifested in my patients. Later I came to understand that I really didn’t know how to think about the composition on an “unconscious inner world” or how it came into existence. I knew it related to early childhood experience, but it was still rather vague to me.

One area that was of particular interest to me, and for which I seemed to have some affinity, was dream interpretation. I found dreams fascinating and enjoyed trying to make sense of my own. Over time, I observed that most of the emotional states that were depicted in my own dreams, and those of my patients, seemed to be embedded in the context of a relationship between a “part of self” and a “version of mom or dad.” I slowly began to recognize from supervision and personal analysis that human emotions are both the “link” between two people and the substance that gives “meaning” to that link. I also began to see that these emotional links between self and other began very early in infancy, perhaps even before birth. The idea of “before birth” seemed a bit hard to swallow for many years although it has come to make sense to me.

The Creation of “Internal Objects” Paired with “Self”:

In order to share how this now makes sense to me, I have to make a brief digression back to the concept of “preconceptions.” I primarily came to understand the concept via the ideas of the English psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion as described by others, especially Donald Meltzer.

To describe the concept of a “preconception” as used by Bion, the analogy I find most helpful relates to oysters making a pearl around a grain of sand. It is as if we humans, as part of our ancestral, phylogenetic heritage, have two grains of sand as “preconceptions,” one of a mom and one of a dad. In other words, we are programmed to find a mother figure and a father figure in the outside world and begin to create an internal “pearl” of a relationship with them, analogous to Lorenz’s ducklings imprinting on the first figure with whom they come into contact.

These two grains of sand probably are being formed before birth, but are rapidly and substantially added to immediately after birth and then modified gradually over the ensuing years of childhood. This entire concept as I have just outlined is crucial for making sense of human experience and behavior, and is the model, as far as I am concerned, that best harmonizes with everything I have come to know and understand about development and mental functioning, both in health and illness. The key implication is that the unconscious inner world always develops and operates, in ordinary circumstances, in a context of a “paired relationship” between self and object.

At this point you may ask about the situation in which one parent is missing in early life, as is probably more common with absent fathers. The baby will still grow a “pearl” version of a father, but it will be in the form of the presence of an “absent father,” and therefore, more prone to distortions that may be problematic in later life. But the bottom line is that we are predisposed to create an internal version of a mom and one of a dad. Note that those approximate Freud’s “superego” and Klein’s “internal objects.”

A Summary of Unconscious Structures as Paired Relationships:

I would like to summarize my observations about the structures found in “unconscious inner worlds.” As I have become more adept at gleaning the infantile prototype of emotional experience, I have come to several conclusions. I don’t know that I can “prove” them to the “dedicated skeptic,” but I can say I find them of extreme value in making sense of a patient’s comments, behaviors, and experience.

1 – Infants seem to record their most primitive, archaic emotions, as “embedded in a relationship” between a “part of self” and a “version of mom or dad.” This is at the level of the “amygdala” and thus unavailable to be thought about via conscious introspection. They will progressively rework the experience, trying to give it some coherence of meaning, for many years later. Powerful experiences will often remain influential throughout the individual’s entire life.

For example, a four year old girl, born so prematurely that she required a tracheotomy for a period of time in the neonatal ICU, was playing with me in a family therapy session. I had a rubber “monster” finger puppet with a large mouth on my index finger. As she tentatively put her own index finger into its mouth, she recoiled as if in pain, cried “Ouch!” and simultaneously touched her neck with her other hand, and immediately looked at her mom. The mother had noticed the same thing and said to her, “You are remembering when you had a tracheotomy.”

2 – To expand on my “oyster analogy” mentioned above, phylogenetic transmission of genetic capacities seems to predispose human infants to expect there to be both a mother and a father in their lives. I can imagine this had survival value in a world of hungry predators. In humans, as I mentioned earlier with dads, this seems to be so profound, that the absence of the expected “good” parent seems to create an experience of the presence of a “bad” parent who is “bad” in the sense that they are absent. How problematic that may be for development, if at all, is highly variable. It is obviously an issue to acknowledge and keep in mind in the increasingly common situation of single parent or same sex parent situations. Needless to say, it is more important for a child to be loved than to have the politically correct parenting situation. As I continually say, “Everything in life is a trade off.”

I have had many experiences with patients who were adopted or never knew one of their biological parents. Fascinatingly, there is always an identifiable presence in their inner world of the missing parent, invariably depicted in their dreams if not in their waking life. At minimum, the pairing of a part of self with the missing parent is likely to present as something missing that a part of self is trying to find or understand in the dream. Where the loss of the biological parent was felt to be more traumatic, for whatever reason, this pairing can present in dreams as a “bad or unlovable part of self,” locked in a relationship with an abandoning or rejecting version of a parent.

3 – The earlier in infancy one of these paired relationships can be traced, the more the version of mom or dad takes on a “function” or specific “quality.” Since these are more primitive components or aspects of

that parents' functioning and behavior, they represent less than the whole of the parent. Because of this, Melanie Klein gave these the name "part-objects" to differentiate them from later, more wholly integrated and developed versions of mom or dad.

You can perhaps see the emphasis on dad's "penis function" in the four year old boy mentioned in relation to his dad's appendectomy scar. An equally compelling example for me occurred with a couple I saw for about two years. The wife, who had fought bitterly with her domineering and controlling father throughout her childhood, had an unsuccessful early breast feeding experience in that it was disrupted at just a few months of age when her mother became pregnant with a second child.

Of special interest to me were the expletives the wife used in front of me, when enraged with her husband, an event I witnessed in nearly all of their sessions. To my amazement, every expletive she used was a variation on the theme of a bad, hated penis. She easily had a dozen versions of prick, dick, dickhead, cock sucker, pencil shafted m...r f...r, etc., all expressed with a venom that would make a black mamba envious and a sailor blush.

My reconstruction of her early relationships was that she was greatly distressed by her early weaning from the breast. To preserve her tenuous relation with a somewhat depressed mom, she displaced her hurt and rage to her father. But because the original injury was with the breast and its "nipple/penis," she remained enraged and aggrieved at a very primitive, part object level. I cannot say at what age she mated her "preconception" of a penis, and her father, with the lost nipple, but if her rage at her husband's penis was any indication, the focus on her father, as a part-object, began early and raged lifelong.

4 – Every human being's inner world contains a handful of these pairings between parts of self and versions of mom or dad, at part or whole object levels. These pairings become the "templates," if you will, for what to expect in relationships for the rest of one's life.

They are at the root of a person's basic "outlook on life" as manifested in basic trust, optimism, pessimism, self-esteem, etc. The "emotional stamp" of the personality in terms of happiness, sadness, anxiety, depression, guilt, anger, etc. is also rooted in these paired relationships.

When it comes time to pick a partner in life, these relationships stored at the level of the amygdala will have a disproportionate influence on that selection at an unconscious level. [See Module Three on "The Marital Selection Process."]

The bare minimum of paired relationships, between a part of self and a version of mom or dad, from a schematic and theoretical frame of reference, would necessarily include the following pairings in all human unconscious inner worlds:

- a "good part of self" paired with a "good version of mom"
- a "bad part of self" paired with a "bad version of mom"
- a "good part of self" paired with a "good version of dad"
- a "bad part of self" paired with a "bad version of dad"

The specific qualities of these parts of self and versions of mom or dad are as variable as the entire range of human imagination can create. But at a bare minimum, they can be distilled down into these four categories in the broadest sense.

Of great interest to me is how these basic versions can accrue qualities that are added from early experience with caregivers, siblings, or any other important figures from early childhood. These figures' qualities seem to add to the internal versions of the parents, perhaps as a result of the brain's phylogenetic inheritance of a capacity for "preconceptions." I do not have the impression that the other individuals become a new separate internal object, e.g. an internal version of a nanny, sibling, uncle, etc.

That is not to say that siblings, relatives, housekeepers, etc. do not show up in dreams. But they tend to represent parts of self or versions of mom or dad when one analyzes their significance.

The Early Super-Ego:

I find Freud's term "super-ego" to be too abstract to be clinically useful. I would prefer to replace it with the concept of "internal versions of mom or dad." These can then be refined to their dominant qualities at hand at that moment, positive or negative, primitive or well-developed, aspirational or critical, etc.

This latter approach allows for very specific comments from a therapist about the patient's internal structures that are likely to be more helpful in understanding the patient's developmental history and its recreation in the therapy as "transference."

Furthermore, the paired relationships in which these versions of mom or dad are embedded at the level of the amygdala are continually being unconsciously recreated in the outside world, as the "repetition compulsion." Having the concept of a "paired relationship" allows the therapist to consider the possibility that at a given moment, someone is being given the role of either half of the paired relationship, i.e. a part of self or a version of mom or dad.

[Note: Part One of Module Two contains a detailed elaboration of these "paired relationships" and the structural composition of the unconscious inner world.]

[Note: Module Six has a section on "The Super-Ego and Conscience."]