

Life Experience: ‘Baby Level’ Emotions versus ‘Adult’ Cognitive Meanings

Introduction:

Life experiences commence in the womb, continue after birth, and have the potential to be stored in the brain as some type of memory forms. It is highly likely that neuroscience and infant research will make great strides in taking our understanding of the storage of very early experience even further. However, studies of babies before and after birth have already put us in a position to create models that are very useful for making sense of human experience and behavior as it relates to the earliest of experiences in life.

I find it extremely useful to picture memory as commencing before the infant has the capacity to “think” – in a cognitive fashion – about the possible meaning of its experience. This has several implications.

1 – The most useful model I have found starts with the assumption that humans have inherited, from our reptilian and mammalian ancestors, an “expectation” of the existence of a mother and father figure and their “functions” of feeding, etc. These expectations can be thought of using the English psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion’s concept of innate “preconceptions.”

2 – The second implication of memory before and just after birth is that it appears to be stored, not as a picture or a thought, but as a “feeling.” This occurs at a midbrain level, in structures that are part of the limbic system, beginning with the “amygdala” from “in utero” through the first two years of life. These “memories as feelings” are not able to be recalled by conscious introspection, but paradoxically can be externalized and relived in the outside world.

The Neuroscience of Early Psychological Development:

Developmental research has demonstrated that at birth massive numbers of neuronal pathways are being created, and the ones used most often become the most permanent. The least used ones are discarded starting a few years after birth, and even more are actively discarded in later childhood.

In the first few days, weeks, and months after birth, the brain – at the level of the cerebral cortex – is developing at a very rapid rate. The frontal lobes of the cortex, where processing emotion in a more cognitive “thinking” manner takes place, are the last to come online, not being fully developed to their mature level until around the age of twenty five years. As these lobes become more integrated with other cortical areas, they begin to make sense of our earlier experiences, already stored at a midbrain level, as mentioned above, as “memories in feeling.”

This now brings us to the central issues for which this website was created. I would like to suggest some key questions to initiate this next area of discussion.

Central Questions Regarding the “Baby Core” of the Personality and Early Development:

1 – How crucial to the rest of one’s life are experiences originating in infancy, say when compared to experiences that happen after language has been actively developed?

[Note: Language usually kicks in meaningfully in the middle of the second year for most toddlers. Thus, the root word ‘infans’ means without speech, suggesting that “infancy” comes to an end somewhere around the beginning to middle of the second year of life after birth.]

2 – Have “meanings” been ascribed to these early, preverbal “memories in feeling,” or are they added later, and if so, when are they added? How realistic are these “meanings” when they are compared to or evaluated from an adult, cognitive point of view?

3 – Can emotionally potent “memories in feeling” remain stored at an “unthinkable” mid-brain level, unaltered by later, cortical level cognitive development? Can they “leak out” from mid-brain structures throughout the lifespan, whenever some emotional situation triggers their release, like a “flashback” from earliest life?

I posed these as rhetorical questions, all with the aim of suggesting that early experiences, when they make an intense emotional impact on the infant, due to intensity or repetition, are powerfully stored in our memory banks. Furthermore, they seem to disproportionately stamp the rest of our lives, for better or worse, which can be a very upsetting thought if things didn’t go well in early infancy.

Klein’s Emphasis on Early Experience:

This brings us to the heart of Melanie Klein’s contributions. She postulated an assumption, which infant psychiatry has since validated, that the infant was not a “blank slate” at birth (i.e. as Freud implied with his ‘autistic phase’ as the first month of life). Rather, as she put it, the infant had sufficient “ego” capacity to enter into an “object relationship” at birth with its mother. Furthermore, she suggested that these early experiences were stored as “memory in feeling” and then as what would later be described as an “unconscious phantasy.”

Although I discuss this area at length in other sections of this module and in Module Two, I do want to emphasize that these earliest experiences will ultimately be given unconscious “meaning,” and be stored as a “phantasy” of a “paired relationship” between a “part of self” and a “version of mom or dad.”

The meaning of that relationship will be embedded in what each half of that pair are imagined to be doing to each other and why they are doing it. The meaning will be suffused with the infant’s own feelings and urges, and thus have the potential to be very unrealistic from an adult, reality perspective.

Infantile Emotional States versus Adult Cognitive Meanings:

At this point I would like to propose that any emotional reaction in life can be evaluated from the question: Is it an emotional reaction emanating from an “adult part of self,” or is it coming primarily from the “baby core” of the personality? In other words, is the emotional reaction one that any reasonable “adult” would have under the circumstances, or is it distorted in some way by being dominated by a “baby” point of view?

If the reaction is “excessive” – either too intense or inappropriately too weak or absent – then one can usually assume, almost axiomatically, that it is an emotional reaction coming from a “baby aspect” of the personality. This assumption can be of great value because it has the potential to shift the focus of an exploration, into the “origin” of a person’s response to something, away from the “here and now” external reality and back to an earlier time.

This shift in focus is often necessary and of significance because, as Klein pointed out, any current situation that overlays an important parallel situation from early life will require both to be reworked in order to achieve a resolution of the current situation. This makes the resolution of many of life’s traumas more complicated than they may appear at first blush. Failure to see the deeper layers of significance of the event increases the risk of inability to work constructively through the difficulty and simultaneously increases the risk of such events leading to more problematic unconscious results, such as depression.

Summary:

I find it helpful to consider that emotionally significant experiences (either because of intensity or repetition), both positive and negative, are first stored at very primitive memory bank levels of the midbrain (e.g. the “amygdala”) and are thus only capable of being experienced as “memories in feeling” but not yet capable of being “thought about.”

As more advanced, higher brain structures become operative, and the connections between them also develop throughout childhood, these earliest “memories as feelings” can have “meanings” ascribed to them, which are then more “thinkable” and “accessible.” Through this inevitable and ubiquitous process, infants move from very primitive “memories as feelings” to thinkable “unconscious phantasies.”

It remains for research to further explore the timetables of this elaboration of “unconscious phantasies.” However, I find it extremely useful to assume the “memories as feelings” are embedded from the beginning in the context of a “object relationship” between a “part of self” and a “version of mom or dad” at a “part object level” initially in the first months after birth and at a more “whole object level” by the middle to latter part of the first year of life.