

Bion's 'Mother-Infant Model' for Creating a Mental Apparatus

Overview:

Melanie Klein assumed that infants naturally developed a 'mind' if given a caring environment, much like how a plant unfolds naturally following its genetic blueprint given adequate soil, nutrients, light, and water. Wilfred Bion, Klein's analyst, amended that idea by suggesting that the mother does much more than just preside over a genetically-based unfolding.

Bion's idea was that the mother is essential to aid the infant in developing a 'mental apparatus' in the first place. That is to say, without interaction with a mothering figure, an infant will not develop a mind at all, at least not anything we would recognize as a properly functioning mind.

Bion's "Mother-Infant" Model:

In Bion's model, the infant has raw, unusable, unthinkable states of mind that are inseparable from bodily states. These may be the equivalent of memories, stored as "feelings" at a mid-brain level in the "amygdala." In any case, he arbitrarily named these the 'beta elements.' The infant communicates these raw, unthinkable states of mind/body to the mother by crying, etc. Next, in response to the infant, the mother tries to imagine what might be happening and responds accordingly. In essence, she does four things with the infant's raw experience.

1 – She takes the infant's state of mind into her own mental space.

2 – She tolerates contact with the infant, i.e. she "contains" the experience. By tolerating contact with the infant and thinking about him or her and the experience at hand, she also strips the beta elements of its unbearable qualities, thus "detoxifying" the experience.

3 – She organizes, in her own mind, what the experience might be about, to give it "meaning."

4 – She then behaves back toward the infant in a manner appropriate to the "meaning" or "significance" she has given the experience, thus making it something that can be "thought" about in the future.

In essence, she has now converted a raw, unthinkable, unusable experience that would have only been suitable for "evacuation" (i.e. as a beta element) into an experience that now has "meaning" and can be used, potentially, in future "thinking."

Bion arbitrarily gave this transformed state of experience the name "alpha element." He referred to the mother's tolerating contact with the baby's mental state as maternal "reverie." This whole process of the mother transforming an unthinkable raw "beta element" via the mother's thinking, into a thinkable "alpha element" was given the name "alpha process."

Summary:

To summarize, the infant has a raw, unthinkable mind/body state – a 'beta element' that is suitable only for evacuation – and empties it out of himself. The mother mentally processes the infant's experiences, and through her "containment," "reverie," and "alpha process," she creates meaning – an "alpha element" – that the infant can now potentially tolerate and think about on his own.

This process probably takes place hundreds of times each day, which helps the infant slowly build up a “mental apparatus” with the capacity to “think” about experiences and give them “meaning.”

An Example:

A simple example would be an infant waking up from a nap and starting to cry. The mother comes in, checks to see if the infant has a wet or soiled diaper that might be chafing his bottom, and then decides that he is most likely hungry. So she then picks up the baby, trying to calm him while she prepares to breast or bottle feed, and then starts feeding him. The baby gradually calms down, settles into feeding, and after a bit, pulls back and looks at his mom. If he could speak, he might say something like this: “Gee mom, when I woke up I thought something terrible was happening to me. But you didn’t seem to think it was a big deal, that it was just that I was hungry. So that’s what hunger feels like, I’ll be darned.”

Failure of This Process and Its Potential Catastrophic Implication:

The rather scary implication in all this is that an infant who does not have someone performing these mental functions is not building up a proper mental apparatus for thinking. He or she is liable, in place of a proper mental apparatus, to build up a “hypertrophied muscle,” suitable only to go essentially from impulse to action without proper intervening thought.

The quality of “thought” taking place in such situations is extremely “concrete,” leading to mental activities that are more like an omnipotent and omniscient assertion of ideas as a substitute for proper thinking, while “evacuating” any unwanted states of mind. In effect, unwanted and potentially painful “baby states of mind” are instantly “projected” into the outside world in a manner that operates completely outside of any conscious awareness as a continuous way of life.

This breeds the sort of mental activities like “my mind is made up; don’t confuse me with the facts” and “what I know is all I need to know.” Such “concrete” mental maneuvers and attendant states of mind are more a function of psychotic thought processes than healthy thinking.

Such infants are at high risk to grow up to have severe personality disorders, and in extreme situations, given certain genetic predispositions, schizophrenia.

[Note: See Module Two, Part Two, Item Six, for a detailed discussion of “Splitting-and-Projective Identification” for an elaboration of the above mentioned “projective processes.” Also see Module Four, Item Three, on “Criminal Behavior and the Baby Core of the Personality,” and Item Five, on “Infantile Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, and the Baby Core of the Personality” for discussions of some examples of consequences of the early breakdown in the mother-infant relationship.]