

Creating a Healthy Personality Structure Through Balanced Introjection and Projection

Overview:

In describing Klein's models for personality development in infancy, we have emphasized bringing order to the infant's existence, modulating the impact of mental pain, the need to split both self and object as part of getting rid of dangerous bad stuff so as to preserve a good relationship between mother and infant, the developing role of maturation in undoing this split in the middle of the first year, and the importance of love as the infant relates to the desire to preserve the relationship to the good object/mother.

This has been necessarily schematic and generalized, primarily for the sake of brevity. But it hasn't quite captured the sense of the "nuts and bolts" of the daily buildup of the good relationship between the mother and the infant and how the personality becomes solid and stable.

Melanie Klein emphasized throughout her writing that the infant's most important initial task was the establishment of the "good breast internally." What I understand Klein to mean is that every loving interaction between the mother and the infant allows the infant to take inside itself the feeling of being loved, comforted, relieved of distress, and filled with satisfaction, reassured that all will be okay and distress can be remedied, that mother will always be there, etc.

These are all "introjections" of good experience and create internal representations of these experiences so that one could say they have become "internalized." These begin with mother seen more for her "functions" of relieving distress ("toilet breast function") and providing satisfaction and sustenance ("feeding breast function") than as a whole, unique, separate person. They are referred to as "part object" functions. Klein's emphasis on internalizing a "good breast" rather than saying internalizing a good mother (which will be an appropriate term when we get further into the depressive position) is a representation of her awareness the infant does not begin life as seeing the mother as a whole person.

Balanced versus Excessive Introjection and Projection:

In ordinary development, the infant and mother find a successful pattern of interacting that is satisfactory to both. The successful modulation and regulation of the inevitable daily pains of life allow for a harmonious interdependence that keeps life progressing along ordinary developmental pathways. The infant expels his distressing experiences. The mother manages the distress without undo difficulty. The infant feels his evacuations are not particularly harmful to mom. And he builds up an internal sense that life is good. The infant's overarching attitude is that existence in the outside world is more pleasurable than painful, the breast (symbolically speaking) is always there in a refreshed state ready to make everything positive, and the infant develops basic trust (in Erik Erikson's sense) and an optimistic outlook on life.

This represents what we could describe as a situation of balanced projection and introjection. But what happens if there is undo pain, more than the infant can bear and more than the "good mom" can fix? For example, this might occur when the mother has to return to work after six weeks of being with the infant full time.

All of a sudden that balanced, predictable, stable, good relationship between mother and infant has been massively disrupted. Now the infant is in danger of being in much greater distress than he can bear and will have to resort to more drastic maneuvers, i.e. massive projection and denial, without the regular balancing out by good experiences that relieve and reassure that all will be okay (i.e. positive introjections).

If we recall Melanie Klein's profound observation that "the absence of a good parent is the presence of a bad parent," now the infant is in danger of "introjecting" the pain, which produces a frustrating "bad"

parent, and the infant's internal buildup of safety, happiness, and goodness is jeopardized. It will have to resort to more extreme separations of "good" and "bad" to keep the bad from overwhelming the good, hence, more intensified projective activities and keeping a wider split between good and bad experience. Perhaps paradoxically, too wide a split renders the personality rigid and actually hampers ongoing development and progression into the depressive position. It may also create a predisposition to confusion about what is properly good or bad as this excessive idealization in this overly wide split is not really based on properly good experience but something more flimsy like: "It is good because I say so since I desperately want something to hold on to."

The infant may also find it increasingly difficult to tell if any positive experience can be trusted, and he may "turn away" from relationships entirely and try to be as self-sufficient as is possible. In this extreme, this may well represent the state of affairs contributing to the development of infantile autism and childhood schizophrenia. While it is likely that both of those are a product of intense genetic predispositions, lesser versions of "omnipotent self-sufficiency" and retreat back to being an "unborn, inside baby" are not at all uncommon when the pain of infancy is not adequately modulated.

What a Stable, Solid Internal World Looks Like:

A happy, optimistic infant has established a basic trust in the availability of mom and caregivers to be there relatively quickly, and absolutely consistently, when the infant is in distress. He has internalized a sense that he is loved and lovable. His own destructive urges are never mobilized for extended periods of frustration and distress, which is a key point. The result is the establishment of a very stable, good, loving version of a paired internal relationship between a good baby part of self and a good loving version of mother (i.e. Klein's part-object "good breast").

As reality testing increases during the first year of life this good internal relationship will take on more characteristics of good qualities and will enhance a core feeling of being a happy, good person. While bad versions of a relationship have also been created in the unconscious inner world, they are not so overpowering and influential that they meaningfully undermine the good relationships.

Later in life, when something really distressing or stressful occurs, it will be this core of goodness that allows for survival without resorting to more massive, problematic defensive maneuvers. It is precisely this point that is at the root of why some adolescent soldiers break down or never recover from the horrific experience of war time, and others manage to cope with the horrible stresses and come out on the other side and to continue to function well in society, even though scarred.

Summary:

In infancy, it is essential that the balance of good versus bad experiences be significantly tipped toward the good so that the developing psyche can install a core of positive, stable, loving feelings between a good baby self and a good loving mom. The regulation of mental pain by the mother allows the infant to trust in the safety of expecting a good mother to always be available without being tasked to cope more violently with excessively intense mental pain.

This allows for the creation of permanent, paired, good relationships that will be the bulwark of emotional stability and optimism throughout the infant's life span. The failure to create a core of good paired relationships will force the infant to cope with life more through the reliance on omnipotent, magical maneuvers and present a greater set of problems as life progresses.