

# What's Love Got To Do With It? Love's Central Role with Mom

## Introduction and Overview:

In Module One, we outlined the interrelationship between the early brain development and intense emotional experience. Now, in Module Two, we are going to take those primitive forerunners of human feeling and thinking and extend it into the world of verbal thinking and more elaborated emotionality at the level of cerebral cortex with its sophisticated frontal lobes. We are going to meld emotionality with paired relationships and unconscious phantasies to create the world about which this module is going to address.

Human beings are unique among animal species for their extraordinary range and depth of emotionality. As alluded to earlier, this seems in a large part to relate to the size of the frontal lobes we have evolved that contribute to the complexity of reasoning and feeling we can bring to life on earth. With this richness of capability comes an abundance of possibilities in relation to the role of various emotions, as well as a significant potential for confusion.

As a beginning mental health professional, I recall wondering where to start in my disorganized attempts to make sense of the array of emotions, or lack of emotions, that my patients brought to my office. Reading Donald Meltzer's books brought me great relief as I realized that envy, jealousy, and separation held a preeminent status among emotions for reasons that were not yet entirely clear to me. By contrast, shame, which some of my colleagues seemed very involved with, was rarely mentioned and of little significance in the Kleinian armamentarium of key emotions needed for use in the consulting room.

When Freud established psychoanalysis, he focused largely on instincts, the impulses they generated, and the frustrations and conflicts that ensued within the individual's psyche. This is a natural offshoot of the Darwinian and neurophysiological framework within which Freud conducted his work. For Freud, emotions were secondary or almost irrelevant to the primary issues and represented something more like "noise in the box," as Donald Meltzer would later describe.

In contrast, Klein acknowledged that emotions were of exceedingly central importance to infants, and following Freud's lead, she recognized the centrality of love and hate, eros and thanatos. But adding to that, she asserted that love was something that an infant was naturally capable of having from birth.

This led Klein to place love particularly high on her list of organizing emotions, long before the singer Tina Turner asked the question in this section's title. Developmentally speaking, Klein believed love was at the root of mental health and its early disruption in infancy lay at the root of emotional disturbance.

In other words, Klein felt that the infant had to ultimately achieve a loving relationship with his primary caregiver, namely the mother, and establish this relationship internally. In my paraphrasing of Klein, the infant had to have a consistently loving relationship with the mother such that he created a loving, good version as one of his internal paired relationships.

In this "good version" of a paired internal relationship, a "lovable" part of self would have a stable, dependably consistent relationship with a loving version of a "good" mom. This would give the infant a core feeling of being lovable and being loved, something akin to the psychologist Erik Erikson's earliest life task of establishing "basic trust." Mind you, all infants will also have a "bad" version of itself paired with a "bad" version of mom, which will have accrued from all of the separations, frustrations, jealousies and envies accumulated in early infancy, etc. However, the key point for Klein is that the "good" relationship should predominate in its central role in the economics of the unconscious inner world.

Taken at this level of description, I doubt anyone would argue against these ideas seeming intuitively sensible. Infants need loving moms with whom they feel loved and special, and toward whom they can be loving in return.

#### Love at a Part Object Level:

With her gift for clinical observation of very small children, Klein took all of this to its earliest origins, much like the “way back machine” of the Rocky and Bullwinkle cartoon series of the 1960’s. She did not simply recognize the need to establish a good internal relationship with the mother in infancy. Instead, Klein would dissect it down to its component parts, before the infant wholly appreciates his whole mother, with her myriad of good qualities and her failings.

The world of excessive stimuli and potential confusion into which infants are born brings with it a desperate need to find something “good” on which to hold. That good turns out to be fundamentally bound up with the part of the mother, which the newborn seems to have come into this world genetically predisposed to literally “root” out in the realm of the mother’s body.

I am speaking of the breast, which Klein says the infant experiences as the source of sustenance, satisfaction, and thus goodness. The holding, skin contact, warmth, emotional relief, and comfort, etc. – all of which are part of the gestalt of being fed by a mother – come to embody the infant’s experience of a feeding and comforting relationship with his “good” mom. This is first experienced at a “part object level” symbolized and established in the unconscious inner world as the “good breast” (even if bottle fed).

#### Why Klein’s Model is Upsetting:

The scary part of this for mothers (and mental health students) is that this would seem to carry the implication that the earliest, most primitive experiences immediately after birth are of profound significance in the developing psyche of the infant. As mentioned earlier, this is not everyone’s cup of tea for many possible reasons, but I will highlight only two for now.

The first is that to really understand development and mental functioning back to its roots, one has to learn to “speak baby,” as one of my colleagues once lamented. By this I mean you have to gradually familiarize yourself with how concrete mental functioning is at the levels of the first days, weeks, and months of life after birth, all of which we humans go to great pains to move beyond as we try to develop a sense of external reality and the rules by which it operates. It is one of the great paradoxes that humans can operate in two essentially incompatible worlds simultaneously: The world of external reality with the laws of physics, etc., and the world of magic that defies everything we know about external reality.

The second difficulty – one that is to a much greater degree a source of preference or perhaps prejudice – is the realization that if infancy is so important, then a lot of tragedy may be occurring right before our eyes. That is to say that a lot of stuff happens to infants that is undesirable, which is not anyone’s fault. However, those experiences may pose a lifelong burden for the innocent baby who came into the world full of hope and good intentions. This is indeed a really upsetting idea! Many a messenger has been killed, so to speak, over such tidings, including Klein.

#### Summary:

Klein apprehended from her years of experience in life and the consulting room that infancy and how it goes seem to be crucial for getting life in the outside world off on the right foot. This good start seems to require that the infant establish this “good” breast version of mom at the foundational core of his personality, with love as the central operative emotion. This “good breast” becomes the basis for the expectation that love, generosity, consideration of others, etc. will be the operating principles for existence in the outside world throughout the infant’s life.

By contrast, virtually all emotional disturbance involves some form of attenuation of love for one's original, primary objects. The capacity for love may have been diminished by excessive mental pain attendant to deprivation, excessive envy, jealousy, guilt, etc. In other situations the tolerance of the risk of potential pain in the event that one loses a loved object may make the individual unwilling to allow love to fully develop, although the capacity for love was originally developed in early infancy.

This latter point is very much linked at a deeper level, as one progresses through childhood, to the realization that even if someone loves you and consciously intends to be there for you forever, he or she could die. As I like to put it, despite a person's promises and best intentions, it is "precariously uncertain that he or she will go on living." For some, this fact makes the risk of love too great to tolerate. A loss in infancy may be all it takes to make this idea dominate someone's psyche for a lifetime. There will always be a need for psychoanalysis!