

# **The Composition of the Unconscious Inner World of Psychic Reality Based on the Creation of the Internal Family of Paired Relationships Between Good and Bad Parts of Self, Mom, and Dad**

## Introduction:

In the years since Freud, psychoanalytic literature has always involved an unconscious inner world where structures and relationships existed. Freud started with the ego, id, and super-ego. Klein modified the discussion as she witnessed the nature of the inner world in early development by working with very young children. She emphasized the “self” (i.e. roughly the equivalent of the ego with a bit of id mixed in) and “internal objects” (i.e. roughly the equivalent of the super-ego).

While observing children’s play, she witnessed what the small child imagined himself and the internal objects were doing to each other. These re-enactments in play represented a ‘song and dance’ presentation of the small child’s “unconscious phantasies.” [Note: Klein used the ‘ph’ to differentiate unconscious phantasies from conscious daydream fantasies with an “f.”] Klein continued to use Freud’s terminology, like ego, super-ego, and id, but was really taking it to a greater depth and precision with the use of unconscious phantasies about self and internal objects in relation to each other.

In Module One I argued for the creation of useful models of the unconscious inner world as it develops in infancy. The models need not be the absolute truth in the sense that they are the only way to understand the material; they only need to be clinically useful with both explanatory and predictive value. We are now in the realm where the precise elaboration of the models will make understanding Kleinian models much easier for us going forward as we explore her daunting array of ideas about mental development and functioning in health and illness.

Since all of Klein’s models revolve around the unconscious phantasies about what is going on in the unconscious inner world of psychic reality, it would be helpful to have a more detailed version of that inner world. As I mentioned in the sections in Module One on Unconscious Phantasy and Paired Relationships, I have spent decades trying to explain these ideas to patients in marital therapy in which these models are extremely valuable in giving couples an understanding of what they do to each other and why they do it.

I am convinced by my studies of neuroanatomical development, combined with the logic of evolutionary development in higher organisms, that the brain is wired to create versions of mom and dad in the psyche so that the newborn organism will quickly attach to the parent for survival. All of my clinical experience is supportive of that impression. So here is the model I find most useful for understanding the unconscious inner world of man.

## Paired Relationships Between Self and Other:

Freud talks about ‘ego’ and ‘objects’ and has them connected by ‘instincts’ or ‘drives.’ He has them doing things to each other and influencing each other. But ego and super-ego, in particular, are very abstract metapsychological terms – sort of above the fray if you will.

Klein brought these elements closer to home with an emphasis on ‘self,’ ‘internal objects,’ and what they are imagined to be doing to each other in the form of ‘unconscious phantasies.’ However, being a clinician first and foremost, she was not overly interested in metapsychology, and she was trying to preserve the idea that she was fully compliant with Freud in key areas.

I spent much of my first decade in psychoanalytic training trying to make sense of what the hell was meant by “internal objects.” I hope to spare the reader that same struggle and leave you with more constructive issues to puzzle your way through.

The punch line is that we humans create a handful of internal relationships in early infancy that will for the most part dominate us for the rest of our lives. These relationships are between a part of self and a version of mom or dad. These versions of mom and dad can be good or bad versions, and they can be about a more “whole object” version of the parent, or they can be focused predominantly on a “part or aspect of the parent.”

While I cannot definitively explain why some individual’s internal figures may be stuck at a more part object level, I suspect it has to do with the degree of emotional distress and repetition of that distress in very early infancy, which determines whether or not that version of the parent fails to go on to be elaborated into a more whole object quality of figure.

Let’s take two fairly dramatic but not uncommon early experiences: Adoption and colic. In the case of adoption, imagine a pregnant young woman, unmarried and in college, who realizes that she is realistically not yet ready to become a mother but has a loving attitude toward the infant inside her. The young woman puts the baby up for adoption, and after being adopted at birth, it is guaranteed that at some level that the developing baby will realize that the original person that he lived inside for nine months is no longer around and will wonder what happened.

Now let’s consider an infant that is being breast fed by its biological mother and at two weeks of age starts to have an upset stomach every afternoon around 4 or 5 pm and cannot be consoled for several hours until he collapses with exhaustion, along with his extremely distressed parents. Picture this being a nightly affair until it spontaneously abates around the beginning of the fourth month of life.

For discussion’s sake, I will make the adoptive parents and the colicky baby’s parents all devoted to and happy about being a parent, without any meaningful reservations, and equally adequate to the tasks of parenting. I will arbitrarily restrict the discussion to the mothers and ask what might the differences be in the internal relationships to the mothers? In both cases I am going to suggest that there is the creation of a paired relationship between a good part of self that feels loved and lovable, and a good loving version of a mom. So what we need to compare are the less good versions of self and mom to see what quality is prominent in those relationships.

Let’s assume that the adopted baby is easy going and happy with its adopted family, but has a lingering internal feeling that someone is missing and wonders why that person left and was anything wrong. The parents, if so inclined, will not be able to tell the child he is adopted until language has kicked in sufficiently, thus no earlier than the second half of the second year of life. So I would propose that this adopted child has created in its unconscious inner world a version of a mom who has gone away and in that sense is a “bad version of mom.” But she may be a version that is thought about and progressively added to so that she might be a whole version of a mom who has gone away. This mom would be paired with a part of self that feels he can be left behind even if he has yet to figure out why. In summary, we could describe an internal relationship between a “bad” part of self that is felt to be abandonable, and a bad version of a mom who abandons the baby. Since a good mom has taken over, and the baby has more of an unanswered question than active distress, we could say that this is a very mild “bad” relationship, hardly deserving the designation “bad.”

Let’s contrast that paired internal relationship with the ones created in the inner world of the severely colicky baby who has been repeatedly significantly traumatized despite having loving, competent, well-meaning parents. He has had the repeated experience that after his afternoon feeding, something goes horribly wrong. While different infants would create different phantasies about what is happening and why, I would arbitrarily say that this baby imagined that he was devouring the breast and the pieces of the breast were harming or biting it back in retaliation. I once saw a child with a history of colic who stopped

eating meat products around the age of one and explained a couple of years later that she stopped eating meat because “meat is people.”

I would propose that the internal world of the colicky baby is likely to have a paired internal relationship between himself and a version of mom that is more distressing, problematic, and more primitive. In that child, this internal relationship might remain at a ‘part object’ level. That relationship would be between a part of self that is felt to be bad – in that it does harm to his object in the form of devouring it – and a breast that has been ruined and is retaliating once inside the baby.

It is important to keep in mind that I am talking about very primitive unconscious phantasies. We can’t know for sure how these would evolve, but we would gradually see evidence of their nature in the child’s behavior as he is growing up. These paired internal relationships would represent what the child would expect of the world as he goes through life.

An adopted child might have excessive curiosity about where someone has gone and wonder if it was due to something bad that the child had done. Thus, he would likely be externalizing and recreating an internal relationship. As an adult, he might be excessively keen on being liked and not want to be left out of anything.

Similarly, a child with a history of colic who tends to have severe restrictions in what he is willing to try eating or who regularly breaks toys – seemingly intentionally – and then becomes inconsolable, may be externalizing and recreating his internal relationships. As an adult, he might be prone to regularly make other people’s stomachs churn with distress by being provocative, or perhaps the opposite concern for never allowing any distress in self or other.

#### Summary of the Common, Bare Minimum Internal Versions of Parents:

I suggested in Module One that all infants are hardwired, like an oyster with built-in grains of sand around which it will create a pearl, to create internal versions of mom and dad with whom he will have some quality of relationship. The actual number of permanent relationships that are significant in a given individual are probably in the realm of four to six, but I don’t feel I can say a number declaratively. What I can do is outline in a schematic fashion what they might be found most commonly. So here goes.

1 – The bare minimum probably would be four, a good and bad version of mom and a good and bad version of dad. The relative significance of each might vary greatly from individual to individual.

What complicates this picture is the influence of other important caregivers in infancy and that of siblings. While they can be of profound importance in early development, I do not have the impression that they become independent internal structures. I suspect that the hard wiring of the brain, with its phylogenetically based ‘preconceptions’ of what the infant will find in the environment, causes the early experiences with caregivers and siblings to accrue to the internalized versions of mom and dad.

Going back to my oyster analogy, do we get a pearl that is irregular in shape with lobes coming off that represent the influence of other caregivers and siblings, or do they form their own pearls? My experience with patients in analysis causes me to lean toward the one pearl model, but I cannot say that is fact.

2 – I think for infants who have had a more problematic entrance into the world and ongoing difficulties in the early months of life that the four minimum versions of mom and dad become complicated by part object versions of mom and dad. Thus, we could have – at least in theory – whole object versions of a good or bad mom or dad that were evolved later in infancy, and/or part object versions that were left over from the earliest days and weeks of infancy.

When one treats more borderline patients, one is often aware of the patient externalizing and recreating very primitive versions of bad objects. I am reminded of a patient whose expletives were all slang, hostile terms for a man's penis. She was perhaps expressing a view of a bad, primitive version of dad who was felt to have ruined everything in the family, an idea that actually fit her history well.

#### Summary of the Common, Bare Minimum Versions of Self:

The versions of parents, as far as the baby is concerned, are already 'perfect.' That is to say that they are imagined to have everything, know everything, and be able to do anything. It will take years for most parents to disabuse the child of these aggrandized phantasies, typically sometime during the child's adolescence.

The infant, on the other hand, starts at the opposite end of the spectrum. It is small, helpless, needy, incompetent compared to grown-ups, and understands very little. It is guaranteed that this state of helpless dependence will be recorded in the psyche, even when things go well in infancy.

In trying to catalogue how the parts of self are created and which are universal, I find two variables to be of particular value to aid our thinking. The first has to do with 'levels of maturity,' and the second has to do with whether the part of self 'turns toward' the good parents and good family or if it 'turns away' from the good parents and family.

With those two variables in mind, I propose that the unconscious inner world with its paired relationships must have a bare minimum of three classes or parts of self.

1 – The "good baby parts of self" are probably multiple in any personality. By definition, what makes them "good" is that they have a desire to 'turn toward' good external and internal figures, assuming that some exist in the environment. These "good baby parts" originate in infancy, in concert with the creation of the internal parental figures to make up the above mentioned paired relationships.

[Note: It is probable that each infant, as he is moving into childhood, will develop basic attitudes about himself that are consistently reinforced by the environment. These will ultimately become part of the core views of one's self. Certainly one sees being smart, athletic, musical, funny, artistic, etc. as becoming key components of the identity of many children. The only rub is that these are attitudes that are most likely to begin after the ages of 3 to 6 years in most children. As such, they don't qualify as "baby core" elements in the sense of identity.]

2 – The second figure that shows up as a part of self in the handful of 'paired relationships' is the "adult self," which can exist at any age. It has two distinguishing characteristics. The first is that it is the most mature part of the self at any age. The second is that he wishes to model himself after the good parents, assuming there are some in the environment. This is the part of the child that parents and therapists alike are always trying to enlist as a helper in life.

3 – The third part of self is the "bad part of self," which by definition "turns away" from the good parents and family both externally and most importantly internally. It originates with the baby that is left out, frustrated, filled with envy and jealousy, and starts sucking his proverbial thumb with an attitude of "I don't need you, I can get along fine by myself."

The key point about this part of self is that the baby resists, literally by definition, ever being drawn into the sphere of influence of the good family. This is why when this part of self dominates the personality – as in addictions for example – it is so resistant to change and prone to relapse.

This part of self may be helpful as a resource to survive infancy, but where its development is extensive and influence strong, the door to emotional disturbance is opened wide. The Bible, literature, and all of

history are replete with stories of the dominance of this part of self. The Lucifer myth from the Bible is a wonderful example of the influence of this part of self when it is dominated by unconscious envy.

I have found it useful to think of this part of self by highlighting its core component attributes so that one can recognize the variable influence of particular elements within a given individual's personality. With its most essential five components in mind, I have thought of the bad self as the: "Envious, Omnipotent, Know-It-All, Destructive, and Self-Sufficient Parts of Self."

Self-sufficiency is the universal element in all infants and need not be problematic if it gives way to reliance on others when they are available. In contrast, where envy is strong, the destructive use of omnipotence and omniscience is much more likely to be prominent. [See Module Five for more on "The Bad Self."]

[Note: The same point can be applied to the development during childhood of the "bad self" as we applied to the "good baby parts" of self. The child can grow his capacities to turn away and feel self-sufficient using all of his own resources and promoting those to which the parents are most vulnerable or blind, which Donald Meltzer says often amounts to the same thing. So this bad part of self may use his intellect to be clever, or he may be more muscular or pride himself on cruelty, etc.]

#### Summary of Parts of Self:

To summarize these parts of self, Disney's movie version of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" gives a useful depiction. Doc would stand for the adult self, the most mature part of self and aligned with the good parents. Happy, Bashful, Sleepy, Dopey, and Sneezzy would correspond roughly to happy, shy, sleepy, silly, and psychosomatic baby aspects of self. Grumpy would represent a watered down version of the bad self.

#### Externalization and Recreation of These Paired Relationships in Life and the Transference:

The main reason I find this model of paired relationships between parts of self and internal versions of mom or dad so helpful is that it can be used to explain most of observed human behavior. If one assumes that these paired relationships represent the "only game in town," then the individual will use them as a template for understanding all relationships in life. Furthermore, they will be the only way that individual knows how to relate in life or how to interpret an event when it occurs.

To give a concrete set of contrasting situations, I once had two women simultaneously in treatment who had diametrically opposite reactions to being touched by their husbands. One had a mother who had been severely depressed when the patient was born. We came to understand, based primarily on how she treated me in the transference, that she apparently felt in early infancy that any need she had of her mother was a burden to the mother, and it was preferable for the baby to "hold itself together and not have any needs." If someone was to impinge on her while she was desperately trying to be self-sufficient, and not a burden, she experienced the contact as an attack on her tenuous feeling of being held together. Needless to say, this held sway over a desire to have a physical relationship with her husband.

In contrast, a patient who had been the second of three children, born very close together in age to a mother who was relatively non-verbal but physically demonstrative, only felt she was a good person and lovable if her husband wanted to have sex with her.

What was interesting about both women was that they unconsciously picked husbands who recreated more of the "bad" version of internal mothers, perhaps partly because they both had relatively unavailable, passive fathers. Thus, in both cases the problematic paired internal relationship between a bad, neglected, unloved part of self and a bad unavailable, rejecting mom was recreated and ultimately came to dominate married life.

Summary:

I find it useful to create a model for the composition of the unconscious inner world that suggests the internal world tends to be populated by relationships, not just isolated individual figures floating around with no connection to each other. These relationships are created in infancy, as the brain is developing, and remain throughout the lifespan. At the end of life, they tend to be all that remains.