

## Section 5 - Splitting-and-Idealization

### Overview:

We introduced this topic in our discussion of the paranoid-schizoid position as an essential component maneuver for the infant to bring order to its world. the infant would endeavor to hold on to all that is pleasurable and therefore “good”, while simultaneously evacuating anything that is distressing and therefore “bad” into the outside world. This dividing of the world into good and bad is the process of “splitting-and-idealization” and the evacuating of the bad half into the outside world is the process of “splitting-and-projective identification”. [Note: I have borrowed both hyphenated terms from Donald Meltzer.]

Since I have described this term in detail in the section on the paranoid-schizoid position and its attendant maneuvers for normal development earlier in this module, I will now speak about “idealization” more generally in later development and in daily life .

### Idealization in Development and Daily Life:

To begin I would like to highlight some ideas that I find useful:

1 – Idealization is an essential and necessary aspect of early infancy and should gradually give way to a more mature version of reality testing during childhood and adolescence. By adulthood it should be clear that there is no good evidence that magic exists, perfection should be seen as impossible, the world should be seen as more grey than black and white, and everything choice in life should be recognized as a “trade-off”.

Whenever one sees an adult who is holding on to unrealistic, magical, idealized attitudes about life in the real world, it should be recognized as coming from the “baby core” of the personality. To the extent that these attitudes dominate the person and their functioning in life, the potential for these attitudes to become problematic goes up exponentially.

The continuation of such thought processes later in life is often evidence of a unconscious attempt to avoid deep seated confusion about what is good and what is not. The fear that something is going to be ruined by a little bit of “bad” creeping in is typical of the thinking of a small child, but should not be dominant later in life. The juice from the peas touching the hamburger patty or a broken piece missing from a cookie, may feel like the calamitous ruin of something to a small child, but they should not be an issue to an adult.

2 – Idealization amounts to removing any imperfections or impurities to the point that what is left is perfect. This is a serious problem in ways that may not be immediately obvious at first blush. It poses several problems.

– If something is perfect, it is very hard to keep from spoiling it. Everything done in relation to it must be kept perfect as well.

– If a parent is idealized, they will at some level be imagined to expect perfection from everyone around them. Picture a stage mother or little league father constantly hovering over their small child’s performance and effectively demanding perfection of their child from the child’s point of view. This is why “idealized Gods” are so hard to please in the sense of a religion dominated by baby core thinking. [Note: See Module Four for a discussion of this aspect in “The Baby Core in Religion and Religious Thought”.]

3 – When under stress, people often find it difficult to “think” or they literally stop thinking. They tend then to resort to very limited, concrete approaches in which everything is black or white because the complexity that shades of grey require one to ponder through simply seem too daunting at that moment of stress. It is in these states of mind that people return to the idea that there must be a bad guy who can be blamed, or a causal explanation that seems obvious, the “where there is smoke there is fire” type of limited logic.

It is probably obvious that this type of thinking relies on prejudices as preconceived background assumptions. It also tends to create a desire for an “all knowing” savior who can fix the problem at hand. That savior would have originally have been mommy, but she morphs later in adult life into some version of a god. As the saying goes, “there are no atheists in a foxhole”.

Summary:

Splitting-and-idealization as a normal infantile process necessary to bring order to the confusion, chaos, and helplessness that is infancy, must give way over development to more mature ways of thinking that involve a more sophisticated level of reality testing.

Where idealization remains excessively prominent in one’s thinking processes later in life, it is evidence that development has gone awry and poses potential serious problems. It leads to rigid, concrete, simplistic thinking and often overlays much more confused, troubled thinking and phantasies left over from infancy.