

Section 5 - Sibling Rivalry

Background:

I have been in practice now for nearly four decades and sibling rivalry is an issue that never ceases to amaze me in the various ways it comes up with great intensity, at any age, throughout the lifespan. Although it arises in early childhood, it seems to be a product of baby states of mind at any age that those baby emotions are activated. This means that virtually all circumstances or functions that bring families and siblings together, or require their interaction, have the potential to generate intense sibling rivalry.

We will need a simple definition of sibling rivalry before we dive into the subject.

Definition:

Sibling rivalry is essentially the emotional and behavioral consequences of the feelings of envy and jealousy experienced by any child in relation to an actual sibling, or someone in the functional role of sibling, meaning near one's same age. Those feelings originate in infancy and early childhood and are most intense when the ages of siblings are less than two years apart. Interestingly, they can also be intense as a function of the "baby core" of the personality, even when the sibling is born after the older child has passed the age of four.

Some Quotes From Siblings at the Arrival of a New Baby:

- "Okay, I have seen the baby, now can you take it back to the hospital".
- "Mom, I want you to throw it out the window" (or alternately "...flush it down the toilet")!
- "Dad, can we tie the new baby to the back of the car and drag it on the freeway"?
- "Mom, I want to be the baby!"

Spacing of Births and Sibling Rivalry:

There is a constructive logic to sibling spacing that has powerful reasoning behind it. The ideal spacing between siblings, all other things being equal, and they often are not, would be twenty four to thirty six months apart. When the space between siblings is greater than three years, the older child is doing things that are too advanced for the younger one to join in effectively.

When sibling spacing is less than 24 months apart, the intensity of the envy and jealousy go up logarithmically. At 18 months or less, the sibling rivalry intensity begins to risk significant detrimental emotional impact on the development of potentially either child, but most commonly the older one.

The logic behind these observations follows from several factors in combination. They include the age at which the older child will become aware of the pregnancy, the older child's language capacity at that time, and how much that older child still experiences his or herself to still be a "needy baby".

For example, if the spacing turned out to be 18 months, the mother would begin "showing" typically by four months, which suggests that the older child would likely apprehend the pregnancy around 13 months of age, perhaps earlier. It would therefore still be in diapers, have very little receptive or expressive language capability, and would still likely be very intensely invested emotionally in being "mommy's baby". The lack of language would make it more difficult for the mother to forewarn the older child and try to prepare it for the arrival of the new baby.

When the spacing gets down to 11 to 15 months apart, and there are several children with that spacing, one will invariably find more serious impacts on emotional development. Because of that, one of the first questions I ask people when I see serious emotional disturbance is how many siblings were there and with what spacing.

It is important to realize that I am not saying all closely spaced children will have emotional disturbance. "Good enough" parenting combined with a constitutional predisposition that is able to tolerate the losses

can result in the children all doing just fine. But I am declaratively stating that the risk of “problematic” sibling rivalry impacting development goes up considerably when the spacing is less than 18 months.

Parental unhappiness, disturbance, or divorce obviously adds to the negative impact. Parental favoritism is always assumed by children and any actual trend in that direction is usually a seriously negative factor on the self-esteem and development of the children not receiving the favoritism. Such parental behavior is invariably a sign of narcissism, serious immaturity, or disturbance in that parent. Most parents intuit that they should treat their children as equally as is possible and make them all feel loved and special.

Manifestations of Sibling Rivalry in Ordinary Family Life:

1 – Feeling displaced by a new birth:

Sibling rivalry is ordinarily first evident when, as the name implies, a new sibling arrives in the family. The intensity of the feelings about the new baby seem to be partly constitutional, partly a function of the preparation for the new birth, partly a function of the spacing, and a function of the total number of children already in the family. The mathematical calculation is essentially: “How much of mom is there to go around and how much of a share am I now going to lose?”

In most families, when the second child is born, the first turns to the father, often then becoming his favorite because mother is occupied with the new baby. A total of three children seems to be the maximum number that most parents can manage without serious deprivation of one or more children. At four children, unless they are spaced four or more years apart (which risks making each child functionally an “only child” in terms of playing with each other), most parents cannot divide their time sufficiently for there not to be significant deprivation of attention to one or more children.

My experience of families larger than four has been that even when they are superficially a happy family, I see evidence of significant harm done developmentally to several of the children. It is simply impossible to not have some of the children suffer significant, felt, emotional deprivation.

2 – Envy of sibling’s attention and/or achievement:

This is obvious in childhood, but it can be seen as operative in all families throughout life, and in most workplaces where co-workers are functionally siblings. While it is inevitable, its corrosive effects can be mitigated by a family or workplace that is fair and open in its management and treatment of siblings and issues as they arise on a daily basis. The appearance of favoritism will have a deleterious impact in proportion to the “lack of equitable and fair treatment” of all.

3 – Denial of sibling rivalry by a child:

This is not a natural state of affairs and requires “splitting off” the envy and jealousy. This is often achieved in older children by denying they too are a child. They accomplish that denial by becoming a “co-parent” to the baby while projecting their own baby elements and needs into the baby. In the case of some older girls, this may be genuinely an expression of a constructive identification with the mother and the baby simultaneously. But for every circumstance where it is successful, there are many more where significant resentment is afoot unconsciously.

That “split off” resentment will come home to roost somewhere, sooner or later, often in a choice to never have children of one’s own as an adult. It may also stamp the personality with depression, a masochistic tendency to deny one’s own needs, etc. and is likely to be recreated in a problematic manner in a marriage.

4 – Denial of sibling rivalry by a parent:

I have on occasion been surprised by mothers who were utterly clueless as to why their first child, who always had been so tractable, had increasingly become difficult in the “last six months for no reason”. How that mother could not see the connection to the birth of a sibling six months ago is beyond me.

I should think that such situations imply that the parent had failed to face their own envy and jealousy growing up in their own childhood. In any case, parents who are not aware of sibling rivalry are at great

risk to make it worse and more problematic than it need be. The key parental characteristic that can mitigate sibling rivalry is its acknowledgment combined with attempts to be fair and equal with all the children. A parent in denial cannot possibly address the feelings directly in the child and those feelings will go on unmitigated if not intensified.

5 – Resurgence at parent’s death:

The death of a parent in old age is a loss. A premature death of a parent is usually a tragedy. It is a time when siblings need to be of support to each other, and potentially the surviving parent.

The above would lead one to conclude that the siblings, now much older and mature, would not have sibling rivalry still be a problem. WRONG! Because the baby core of the personality is operative throughout the lifespan, the loss of a parent is unfortunately a time when favoritism, past resentment, and human greed rear their ugly heads and often ruin the sibling relations permanently. Commonly, all of the old childhood grievances will resurface as if a day had not gone by since the last repetition of that grievance. All of this is human, but it is also a huge potential problem.

Lack of parental planning, preparing the siblings for the eventual distribution of the family estate, inequitable distribution, and worse, will make sibling rivalry a much more significant problem than it need be. It is axiomatic that if sibling rivalry was a problem in childhood, it will still be a problem later in life.

Parental Contributions to Sibling Rivalry:

1 – Parental ignorance of the existence of sibling rivalry:

This is never good and always a problem. It suggests, at minimum, a parent who lacks contact with ordinary human emotions. It may indicate that they are particularly out of touch with or in denial of negative emotions. But it suggests that they are out of touch with their own “baby self”, and as such, will be inadequately prepared to deal with a baby and all of the feelings it will reawaken in the baby parts of the parent.

2 – Failure to modulate sibling rivalry:

This is commonly evidence of an inability to deal with destructive, angry emotions on the part of the parent. It may be a sign of immaturity, a lack of contact with feelings and “psychological mindedness”, or simply gross inadequacy as a parent due to excessive narcissism, etc.

3 – Favoring a child:

I am regularly impressed with the sensitivity on the part of parents to the pain of jealousy and envy in their children, and the parents’ instinctive ability to take it into account. These parents seem regularly to go out of their way to attend to the feelings and needs of the “left out” sibling when the other is having a birthday, special achievement, etc.

But I have also seen rather breathtaking favoritism and cruelty toward the left out child. Such behavior, when extreme, seems always to be a function of a parent with a very disturbed area of their personality, often psychotic. As a result, when favoritism is flagrant in a parent or grandparent, I am always on alert for possible psychotic levels of disturbance in the caregiver, even if the caregiver is not floridly psychotic.

In less severe situations, it still indicates invariably that the parent is projecting an idealized or needy baby part of themselves into the favored child. This inability to be more differentiated and separate from that child will have problematic ramifications for that child’s development even if those negative impacts are not obvious to the casual observer. The child that is not being favored will have some degree of grievance and sense of unfair treatment that will be remembered and likely impact later life as well.

Sibling Rivalry in the Workplace:

Sibling rivalry is a function of human emotions and the baby core of the personality, so it will be inevitably recreated in the workplace. Coworkers will stand for siblings, and individuals in position of authority will stand for parental figures. The fair and equitable treatment of all will be as important in the workplace as it

was originally in the family. All for the above mentioned disturbances in the family on the part of siblings and parents will apply to the workplace.

It is worth noting that “one rotten apple can spoil the barrel”. It is possible in some work settings for an individual to undermine the general attempts by most to keep problematic expressions of envy and jealousy out of the work environment. This is even more problematic if that individual has significant authority.

Sibling Rivalry in Marriage:

Most husbands and wives feel loving generosity toward each other. They do things for each other, share the pleasurable and unpleasant tasks equally, and generally feel all is fair. If sibling rivalry had been an issue in childhood for one or both, they manage it consciously in the marriage by being extra equal and fair.

Unfortunately, once they start having children, there is no longer sufficient time and energy to assure that both are getting their fair measure of time, attention, pleasure, exercise, etc. Strain on the baby core of each individual’s personality appears.

The husbands often feel displaced and jealous/envious of the attention the baby gets. The wives often feel unappreciated for the exhausting effort it takes to mother an infant and resent the husband’s assumption that they have been home all day just reading, drinking tea, and getting their nails done.

A variation on this theme is the marriage that from the “get-go” is based on what I think of as a “sibling-ship”. In such marriages, the two parties band together with a goal of getting through life together, in mutual support, but with a relative de-emphasis of the romantic, sexual component of the relationship. They may devote themselves to careers, parenting, etc.

The rub is that there is invariably an inherent, underlying fear or intolerance of having baby needs. This is typically a product of a childhood in which those baby needs were unmet and a source of pain. That fact implies that those needs are still in existence at the level of the baby core of the personality and will likely come home to roost sooner or later, often in a problematic, destabilizing manner.

There is one final element to be mentioned about marriage and sibling rivalry. I have worked with many couples over the decades and restored many marriages. Those that could be saved had a measure of underlying love for each other that could be rekindled when the problematic projections into each other were removed.

However, virtually all of the marriages I could not ultimately improve had one element in common, assuming that both partners had a capacity for love and commitment in a relationship. That element was that one or both had an area of deeply rooted “envious hatred” of the other, usually operative quite unconsciously.

The husband might hate the wife for being the source of everything he needed emotionally, or the wife might hate the husband for his career and the esteem in which he was publicly held. But in any case, the envy could be seen to have been in evidence in childhood toward siblings and parental figures, and now recreated in the marriage.

Summary and Conclusion:

Remember that separation, envy, and jealousy are the big three of potentially painful, negative emotions in relation to mom in infancy. Mom’s relation to dad activates all three of those emotions and we refer to it as the “Oedipal situation”. Mom and dad’s relationship to other children also activates those three emotions and we call it “sibling rivalry”. The primary emotions of sibling rivalry are “envy” and “jealousy”, but they exist in a context of “separation” as attention is given to another child.

Because everyone has an “alive, active baby core” to their personality, the degree to which the above referenced emotions were intense or a problem in infancy and early childhood, is the degree to which they will be a potential problem throughout the lifespan. That includes marriage, the workplace, and all ongoing family relationships.

Where sibling rivalry was too intense to have been constructively and successfully mitigated in childhood, it will be recreated potentially in all later circumstances that roughly approximate the childhood situations. As a result, any and all awareness and acknowledgment of its existence and operation has the potential to improve the situation in which it appears.

Axiom #3: These paired internal relationships, which make up the unconscious inner world, are linked together by “unconscious phantasies”. These phantasies represent what the part of self and the version of mom or dad are imagined to be doing to each other including why they are doing it to each other.

The degree to which these paired relationships are a product of projective processes is the degree to which these relationships need not correspond to things actually done to the individual in external reality. In other words, parts of self and internal parental figures may be imagined to be doing things to each other that bear little resemblance to what the parents actually did with and to the child. [I’ll give a case example of this shortly.]

Definitions:

This focus on the unconscious inner world and its creation and composition allows for a detailed specificity that is utterly lacking in the words super-ego and conscience. For contrast sake, the following are the definitions of each from one of my dictionaries.

Conscience: “Consciousness of the moral right and wrong of one’s own acts or motives.”

Super-ego: “The one of the three divisions of the psyche in psychoanalytic theory that functions to reward and punish through a system of moral attitudes, conscience, and a sense of guilt.”

I rather like these definitions but they tell us little about the prototypic origin of these attitudes and motives that are manifestations of a sense of morality and guilt. To ground this discussion of the origin of these elements in the psyche, we need a brief discussion of brain development.

Brain Development:

For this discussion I would like to arbitrarily divide brain development into three phases. The earliest phase, spanning intra-uterine life to about the first three to four months after birth, I would like to describe as having a disproportionate degree of storage of “experience stored as unthinkable feelings” at a “mid-brain” level, substantially in the “limbic system”.

The second phase is the primitive reworking of these experiences at a cortical level, in effect trying to make sense of these “memories of experience as feelings” and giving them meaning. This activity seems to commence in early infancy, concomitant to and in parallel with the limbic storage of feeling experience, but increases as the months after birth allow for more development of neuronal pathways and connections in the later part of the first year after birth.

The third phase involves the further elaboration of the connections of the cerebral cortex, in particular with the development of the frontal lobes, so unique to homo sapiens. The frontal lobes come increasingly “on-line” during the middle of the first year and are more fully functioning by the end of the second year of life.

To this brain development we need to meld the phylogenetic inheritance of “preconceptions” of a mom and a dad figure to whom we will relate immediately after birth, a necessary inheritance for survival. The brain seems to literally be wired to expect a mom and dad to be found in the outside world, and as infants we will immediately create versions of them, analogous to an oyster forming a pearl around a grain of sand. In this case, we create two pearls, a mom pearl and a dad pearl, as our experiences with each are ongoing.

These versions of mom or dad do not seem to be stored in the psyche as isolated individuals. Instead they seem to be stored as a paired relationship between a part of self and a version of mom or dad.

The earliest raw emotion connecting them can potentially become a life-long element in this paired version, but the meaning of this emotional connection can and will be elaborated and modified during the second and third brain phases of development. These “meanings” will become what Kleinian psychoanalysts refer to as “unconscious phantasies”.

In summary, the creation of these earliest versions of self with mom and/or dad form what we will later refer to as the foundation of the super-ego. If these earliest experiences in life were extremely intense and problematic, then those experiences will powerfully influence the development of the super-ego in ways that have a significant likelihood to be problematic later in life.

By taking a careful history of infancy, we can often make sense of what these earliest relationships were like and what unique meaning the child gave to them, as the experiences were reworked over years of development. It is important to note that the parental behavior can reinforce the worst elements of these early experiences, or can greatly mitigate the potentially problematic nature of these experiences.

Klein’s Models of Development in Infancy, The First Three Months:

We are now in a position to address the key issues of morality, conscience, and guilt. I remember hearing as a young man that the only two things that keep humans civilized were “fear of punishment” and “guilt”. I thought that was an intriguing idea, but I did not have the tools to fully grasp its basis in the unconscious inner world. What I did not yet grasp was that virtually all are attitudes about how we treat others, and how we experience others as treating us, have their basis in infancy, often very early infancy.

This link to infancy stems from the need of the infant to bring order to the chaos of its earliest experience. It looks for something positive and good to hold onto in its experience of life outside the womb. To achieve this, since infants are so literal and concrete in their experience, they seem to innately try to get rid of anything which is felt to be unpleasant and therefore “bad” so that it won’t spoil the “good” stuff they are retaining.

This leads to an inevitable holding on to that which is good and evacuating that which is felt to be bad into the outside world. The good is now purified and thus “ideal”, hence the process can be described as a process of “splitting-and-idealization”.

The evacuation of the “bad” into some container in the outside world could be thought of as “splitting-and-projective identification”. Together these processes represent the predominating mental maneuvers that make up Klein’s “paranoid-schizoid” position.

The word “schizoid” refers to the result of the processes of “splitting-and-idealization” combined with the “splitting-and-projective identification”.

The “paranoid” aspect emanates from the projection of the undesirable elements into the outside world. The resulting paranoid anxiety is that the “bad” stuff will come back home to roost in some negative or retaliatory form.

It is worth noting that self and object are both divided into “ideal” and “bad”. I think this is because the part of self that experiences the bad is felt to have also caused it in some rudimentary manner. Thus, the evacuation of the “bad” into the outside world actually means getting rid of both the bad object and the bad part of self (that is bad because it is connected to that figure).

So this is approximately the state of affairs in the first three to five months of brain development after birth. Earliest experiences, if felt to be too distressing to hold in the mind at a cortical level, as they “leak out” from the midbrain level, will be evacuated.

The result is that the infant will live in an utterly “concrete” world dominated by self-interest, with little understanding of the needs and feelings of other in the more complete sense of the word “empathy”. The pains of separation, envy, and primitive jealousy will be unbearable if intense, and guilt will as yet be a non sequitur. That is because brain development will not yet support it as an emotional state that can be tolerated so it will be evacuated almost instantly.

Klein’s Models of Development in Infancy, The Second Half of the First Year:

To bring guilt into the picture and leave the paranoid world of the “Law of Talion”, the infant will need more brain development at a cortical level, so that experiences can be more integrated. This seems to come online around the middle of the first year of life. The early extreme splitting of self and parental figures, into all good and all bad, can give way to a more integrated awareness of having just one mom and one dad, rather than the earlier versions of a good and bad mom, and good and bad dad.

It is worth noting that I do not mean to imply that the earlier “split” versions disappear from the psyche, but that those earlier neuronal pathways are relegated to the “back burners of the psyche” unless particularly intense reminders activate them.

Ordinarily, as development and emotional maturation occur in life, these earliest attitudes/phantasies are usually modulated by the more advanced, “adult part of self” reminding the more primitive “baby elements” in the personality that their point of view has been superseded by a more advanced one.

So it is in this context of cortical development, in the middle of the first year of life, that the infant finally has the capability of recognizing that its good and bad versions of mom are actually emanating from one and the same person, and that it is the infant’s own emotional attitude that varies from one moment to the next. This development finally puts us in the position to discuss “moral” attitudes and thinking.

The “paranoid schizoid” approach to life and relationships, of almost pure self-interest, was an appropriately “ruthless” period, as concern for the welfare of the object was functionally not yet developed. Furthermore, there was no reason to be concerned about the projected bad stuff, it was simply a case of “good riddance to bad rubbish”.

These background assumptions are no longer the case when the infant begins to recognize that the bad rubbish version of mom is also the loved and needed good mommy.

Melanie Klein gave the unfortunate name “depressive position” to this desirable development that occurs in the middle of the first year of life, linked to brain development, and adequately desirable life circumstances. I say unfortunate because while it represents a positive developmental move to “concern for the welfare” of the object, it sounds like a negative move into “depression”, which was not what she meant at all.

What is implied in her view of this period is that the loving concern for the welfare of the object finally has potentially equal status with concern for oneself. Now it finally matters how one treats other human beings. This allows the concept of “morality” to be grounded in one’s treatment of other human beings, both in psychic and external reality. This is in contrast to arbitrary, prescriptive rules of “right and wrong” such as “one should not smoke cigarettes on Wednesday”.

That brand of morality is much closer to Eric Erikson's "moralism" which is not linked to empathy and goodness, but rather more connected to infantile control of mom and dad, with sanctions at every turn controlling their behavior. One need only look to myths like the "Garden of Eden" to see an example of such infantile states of mind masquerading as "adult" thought.

A Case Example: Ted Bundy

At this point we might develop these concepts by using as an example, the early life of the serial killer Ted Bundy. His mother, who was pregnant out of wedlock, gave birth to him at a home for unwed mothers and left him after a month of being with him (to be given up for adoption) while returning to her parent's home a thousand miles away. After two months of family deliberation, she returned to the home where she left him, to take him with her, and raise him with her parents. He had been left at the home for about two months.

At less than the age of five, he went into his mother's younger sister's bedroom while she was asleep, folded back the bed covers, and placed several sharp kitchen knives next to her legs. In later childhood he was obsessed with "pulp police detective magazines" where crime scenes were described in detail. As a man in his twenties and early thirties he became a serial killer of young women who fit certain physical characteristics.

He was so aware of criminal forensic techniques from his earlier studies that he went undetected for years, dismembering the bodies of his victims. When he was finally apprehended, he had descended into a florid psychotic state, literally biting the buttocks of one of his final potential victims.

Should we think of Ted Bundy as having no conscience? Did he lack a super-ego? Did he not know right from wrong? I would like to argue that these questions are too simplistic to be useful. I would rather think in terms of internalized object relations, between parts of self and various versions of mom or dad, and what is imagined to be happening within each of those relationships, and why it is happening.

Here is my version of what may have happened to baby Ted. His intrauterine experience may have been intensely distressing, since his mother must have been very upset and probably humiliated during the pregnancy which necessitated her being sent to a home for unwed mothers. To whatever degree there is any validity to that assumption, those intense intrauterine experiences would likely have been stored at an unthinkable midbrain level in Ted.

During his first month of life I could imagine that he formed an attachment to his mother before she left him behind, around the end of that first month. During the ensuing two months that she was gone, I suspect that he felt extreme emotional distress, as if he were literally being "torn limb from limb".

Life must have settled down once he was taken to the home of his grandparents and his mother's sisters. That upbringing was purported to be strict but not harsh or abusive. However, as the saying goes, "the die was cast". He had created internal relationships based on his earliest infancy and they were so intense that later experiences could not override those earliest, primitive, apparently unthinkably painful states of mind.

So what might his inner world have contained by one year of age. It likely included a "bad" version of a mother who was felt want to want to get rid of him and abandoned him in a state of torture and agony. Since he never knew who his father was, his internal version of a father would likely also reinforce this sense of being unloved and abandoned despite whatever modulating influence his relationship to his grandfather might have offered.

In summary, his inner world would have, at minimum, likely contained a relationship between a part of self, felt to be unwanted, unloved, and maybe even felt to be hated. That part would be a "bad" part of self in the sense of being unlovable, etc. That bad part of self was paired with a cruel, torturing and abandoning bad version of a "bad" mom. In more classical terminology, this would be a central element in what could then be described as a "sadistic super-ego".

His inner world would have also contained a “good” version of mom, and possibly dad (based on his grandfather), but these “good” versions would be eclipsed during times of distress where “limbic leakage” of his earliest baby experiences would override his relationship to good internal versions of mom or dad.

I suspect that the separation of leaving home to go to college would have left him struggling with these earliest torturous feelings connected to abandonment. He was apparently capable of behaving in an intelligent, charming manner. That might be based on a superficial version of a good object relationship but I suspect it had no real substance to it in his unconscious inner world.

I would like to summarize the implications of this story as I experience them. Ted Bundy had a really problematic internal version of a relationship between an unwanted baby part of self and a really bad version of mom, who not only didn’t want the baby Ted, but was felt to actually torture him cruelly and purposefully.

This really painful connection between a part of self and a version of mom completely eclipsed all other versions of mom or dad, became the “only game in town”, and dominated his early childhood thought processes as he unconsciously tried to understand and give meaning to these earliest experiences (e.g. as seen in the “knives by the legs” and “detective magazines” aspects of his childhood history).

His capacity for loving relationships was simply too undeveloped to override his need to cope with the massive pain embedded at an unthinkable midbrain level of his psyche. His experiences with his rather shallow mother were incapable of elaborating a caring, loving concern for the welfare of his good objects that could neutralize and make up for the pain of his earliest experiences.

Put in slightly more theoretical terms, his “depressive concern for the welfare of his good objects” could not make up for the ongoing pain he experienced internally in the paired relationship between a bad, unloved part of self and a hated, cruel, bad version of an abandoning mom.

The concrete experience of this bad internal object relationship (in effect a really bad half of a “super-ego” relationship) was so painful that it could only be evacuated into the outside world. But as it was expelled and recreated externally, with the roles reversed, he became the torturing mother and the victim was made into the tortured and murdered baby Ted.

Contrasting Ted’s Internal World with a Healthy Super Ego:

Let’s imagine Ted’s life writ differently. If his mother had kept him at home with her parents, had not been ashamed of having a child out of wedlock, and felt lovingly supported by her parents, her pregnancy might have been uneventful for the baby Ted. He would not have stored such intense primitive emotional pain at a midbrain level that began during the pregnancy and was reinforced by his first three months of experience after birth.

By four months of age, not having had a traumatic beginning to his life, the baby Ted would have been able to begin integrating mildly bad versions of mom with fairly good versions of mom, leading to a much more realistic version of mom with whom he could sustain a predominantly loving relationship. His internal world could ultimately contain a “super-ego” dominated by a good relationship between a lovable part of self and a loving mother.

His relationship to a dad, the other half of his super-ego, would have been partly based on an absent dad and partly based on his relationship to his grandfather. Thus his inner world would have probably also contained a somewhat negative, bad version of a relationship to a dad who did not want him and thus abandoned him, in parallel to the bad version of mom. It is possible that this version of dad would have been a less important in his inner world if the relationships to mom and grandfather were adequately positive to counterbalance not having a dad.

The Depressive Position and the Concept of Conscience:

Did Ted Bundy know that it was “morally wrong” to torture, murder, and dismember young women? Of course he knew it was wrong, that is why he tried so hard to not get caught! The question is a non sequitur. The question regarding any criminal act that is more pertinent is why can't the person restrain their compulsive behavior? We all have the conscious fantasy of doing rather awful things to someone who is upsetting us at a given moment in the course of a day and yet we don't act on it.

Most likely everyone, with perhaps the exception of the most decompensated and deluded schizophrenic, can recognize the difference between right and wrong. Conscience is not the issue, the nature of the internal object relationships populating the world of psychic reality is the issue. It is the compulsive externalization of those unthinkable, internal relationships, trying to rid the self of the distress at minimum and make sense of them at maximum. That unconscious externalization is at the root of most criminal behavior.

If a person did not develop a capacity to tolerate the pains of feeling that they have injured a person, toward whom they also have caring feelings, then guilt will not be an emotion motivating that person to make repair. Because the pain of guilt is too painful to bear, then the person will most likely resort to “manic defenses” to deny that they care about the damage done, or deny the damage itself.

The take home lesson is that the person's relationship to the emotion of “guilt” greatly influences their capacity for facing how they treat others. If they cannot bear the emotion of guilt, they will appear to be callous or lacking a conscience, but the real issue will have been a developmental breakdown in the first year of life.

If things broke down in the first year of life, then the next question is what was the nature of the breakdown and to what degree were the parental figures felt to be doing painful things to the baby on purpose? Ted Bundy did to others what he felt had been done to him, even though he most likely had no conscious awareness of why he was doing what he was doing.

A Variation of the “Golden Rule”:

The Golden Rule represents how a “conscience” should operate: Do unto others as you would have them do to you. That would be the proper motto of Klein's depressive position in relationship to mom and dad, the two objects who make up the super-ego, and are locked into rather permanently fixed relationships with various parts of self.

{Note: In classical Freudian metapsychology, the “super-ego” represents the various internalized versions of mom and dad, both good and bad, that are having paired relationships with various parts of self, with “self” representing Freud's “ego” with a bit of Id added.]

It turns out that in disturbed development, a different version of the Golden Rule predominates. That variation of the rule would be more like this: DO UNTO OTHERS AS THEY ARE FELT OR IMAGINED TO BE DOING UNTO YOU. In other words, the more mental pain embedded in early object relationships, the more that pain has the potential to distort development, interfere with movement into the depressive position, and distort the development of the early super-ego relationships between parts of self and versions of mom and dad.

If the most powerful versions of mom or dad are experienced as unloving, abandoning, selfish, mean or cruel, etc., those versions will exist side by side with the loving versions of mom or dad. If the pains of infancy are too intense or ongoing, then there is a danger of those painful “bad” experiences managing to eclipse and overwhelm the loving, positive experiences.

The potential is then for an inner world to be created in which the pains produced by the “bad” internal relationships predominate and a problematic “super-ego” is established that will potentially plague that individual for their lifespan.

What we then have is an inner world in which “parts of self” feel they are being mistreated by bad versions of mom or dad, and the parts of self will feel it is necessary to “turn away” from the internal versions of bad parents. This situation implies that the internal “good” versions of mom and dad cannot be trusted to be available and come to the aid of the baby parts of self that are in pain.

Turning Toward Versus Turning Away From Good Internal Parental Figures:

It is intuitively obvious that for infancy to go well, it is required that the external parental figures and caregivers are trusted to be available in a caring manner, willing to sacrifice on behalf of the infant. If the infant cannot trust in the availability of good parents, an environment is created in which the “bad part of self” can dominate the personality, getting the “good baby parts” to turn to it and away from good parents, both externally and internally.

That is the essential psychic situation underlying a “narcissistic personality organization”, the fundamental psychic situation found in many if not most personalities in which addictive, criminal, or sociopathic behavior takes place.

This implies that the internal worlds of people who seem to lack a concern for how they treat others actually have a very problematic set of relationships between parts of self and versions of mom or dad. In effect, their internal worlds contain a distorted, cruel, harsh, confused, etc. internalized object relationships where the bad, paired relationships predominate over good relationships.

One can easily see the implication of this. These complex internal relationships cannot possibly be usefully described by just saying the person lacks a super-ego or has a harsh one.

Projective Processes and the Nature of the Internal Parents:

There is one additional element that complicates this discussion. A given individual’s super-ego is not just based on what was “done” to them in infancy and/or childhood, it is also a product of the distortions that the child makes of any situation at hand at a given moment in childhood.

What is difficult to grasp, using common sense alone, is that the “evacuations” of painful bad experiences, pained parts of self, and bad versions of mom or dad have to “lodge” somewhere in the outside world. In effect, there has to be a “container” for the projection. That projection will in turn modify and distort the infant’s experience of and resultant view of the object containing its unwanted projection.

Let’s use the situation of a “breast occlusion” episode in which the infant pushes its face too firmly into the breast, while sucking, and blocks its nasal passages. It abruptly gags, coughs, pulls back from the breast, and in some cases starts to cry, and will refuse to feed from that breast for the rest of that feeding.

While we cannot know for sure what that infant experienced, we can create a working model of the situation that is useful. At the moment that the brief suffocation took place, the infant might have felt that the breast from which it was feeding had turned into one that no longer wanted to feed it.

Whatever the infant’s negative experience/phantasy about it was does not really matter. The point is that the breast can be turned “bad” in the infant’s mind even when a loving mother is endeavoring to continue a successful feeding of her loved infant.

If that infant was of a particularly “enviously resentful” persuasion, or particularly sensitive to feeling attacked, that infant might feel that the mother wishes to keep the good stuff for herself and wants the infant to feel bad, needy, small, dependent, etc. In such circumstances, it is the infant’s attitude that is distorting the situation, not the mother’s motives.

As the infant becomes a toddler, and the parents have to restrict its behavior on an almost continuous basis, that same infant may project its own attitudes into the parent and feel that the parent wants to spoil the

infant's time and make it miserable. Now add a much more problematic situation like prematurity, adoption, colic, parental divorce in infancy, etc. and the situation is ripe for potentially huge distortions.

The bottom line is that what we call a super-ego is composed of versions of mom and dad that can, under problematic situations in infancy, lead to very distorted versions of the actual parental figures. Even when the parents are really awful as parents, there is still very significant distortion of those figures. These distorted versions of the actual parents are a product of projections into those parents.

The Evolution From Super-Ego to Super-Ego Ideal in Middle Childhood:

There is one final essential point to be made about the super-ego. This has to do with the evolution of the relationship of the parents to the child as it progresses through childhood.

At the beginning of life, the parents have to constantly monitor the infant and toddler's behavior. They must constantly say "no" to the baby's impulses to put everything in its mouth, grab everything, wander off, etc.

These acts of restricting behavior are often taken as "mean" on the part of the parents. These restrictive parental behaviors are based on loving concern for the infant and toddler, but they are part of the concreteness of the early "super-ego" and its seemingly controlling, restrictive, and punitive aspects.

The result of this early situation is that the child is very much dominated by either loving feelings for idealized parents, or angry, frustrated feelings for parents interfering with its activities, at other moments. On balance, the parents are good, but it is still a situation where the child is controlled by the parents. It has not yet developed a more independent sense of self based on a more internalized sense of the parents as realistic models. Usually this will change.

Somewhere around the period of going off to elementary school, with a quantum leap in independent functioning, as the child becomes more separated from the parents, a change begins to take place in the unconscious internal versions of the parents.

The child is now developing some sense of those qualities and behaviors that are desirable in its parents, and is becoming able to differentiate those from elements in the parents that are less desirable or downright undesirable.

The child is no longer relating to its primary caregivers as a needy, dependent child. Furthermore, it is now meeting new adult figures who are in the new role of primarily teaching and inspiring the child.

As the child goes off to school and meets teachers, the parents of classmates, and other adult figures, it gradually builds a repertoire of adult figures from whom it can pick and choose characteristics from which to model. As it becomes aware of public figures in world politics, history, athletics, the entertainment industry, etc. it can significantly expand the qualities and behaviors that it can use as ideal models to "aspire" to grow up to be like.

Put in other words, the capacity of the growing child to be more differentiated and separate from its parents allows it to create internal figures who may be a composite of a number of desirable qualities that no one person, including one's parents can represent.

This allows the internalized parental figures to be grown from the restrictive, controlling figures of infancy into much more sophisticated, complex models of adult qualities that one can "aspire" to emulate. In effect the super-ego is grown from the loving but bossy and controlling parents of infancy, to inspirational figures of adult life.

The British Kleinian psychoanalyst, Donald Meltzer described this in his book “Sexual States of Mind”, as an evolution from “super-ego” to “super-ego ideal”. In effect, these internal figures become one’s internal inspirational “gods” to model after and “aspire” to grow up to be like.

A key element in this evolution is that one is “psychologically separate” from those figures as now become figures of inspiration.

The early super-ego figures are not separate, are bossy and controlling, and are the “harsh gods” of primitive religious thought, not the “inspirational” ones of the mature personality.

Summary and Conclusion:

Sigmund Freud accurately recognized that human beings have an unconscious inner world in which one felt an awareness of their self. He also saw that humans experienced something that was not self but instead felt to be “above” self, if you will. In this “tripartite model” of the mind he also needed the concept of the “Id” to represent the instincts that were central to his understanding of human nature. He needed a self that was experiencing these instincts, and something above the self that was keeping these instincts from running amok.

Melanie Klein was trying to be a good Freudian, if you will, but her studies took her more into infancy where she became aware of the “baby inside Freud’s child” of the unconscious inner world. She also came to see that infants develop from a period of rather ruthless self-centeredness to an evolving capacity for awareness of and concern for the other, mom in the case of the infant. This evolving capacity for thinking of the other led her to postulate a depressive position that represented a mature capacity for concern for self and other, in equal measure.

As she fleshed out her awareness of the unconscious inner world of psychic reality, Freud’s rather abstract terminology of a “super-ego” came to be represented by “internal objects”. These internal figures were, by genetic preconception, built up around experiences of the actual caregivers of infancy, essentially mom and dad and their surrogates. These figures represented a combination of actual experiences, combined with distortions of experiences, based on projections into these parental figures.

What Klein came to then realize was that we humans live in two worlds simultaneously, that of external reality and that of psychic reality. Furthermore, it turns out that if the infancy is particularly difficult, the psychic reality that results can override and eclipse external reality and its potential influence. The result is that a person can externalize their internal world and do fairly awful things to their fellow man, seemingly without any concern for the other.

Such callous treatment of others would lead to a common sense conclusion that those individuals have no internal guidelines, no “conscience or super-ego”, using those terms loosely. My complaint is that those words are too vague and imprecise to be of much utility. I would prefer to suggest that such mistreatment of others is probably an externalization of internal object relationships, between parts of self and various versions of mom or dad. Used in this manner, the misbehavior can be seen to provide details about the internalized relationships that populate that individual’s unconscious inner world.

One is then in a position to explore the details of that individual’s internalized relationships. In turn one can speculate how early life was experienced, whether one turned toward or away from their “good objects”, to what extent projections into the objects altered that individual’s view of those figures, and what causes the person to behave in the manner they do. The transference relationship with the therapist will reflect these same externalizations and distortions, lending an opportunity to corroborate one’s suspicions about how infancy was experienced.

For me, this represents an infinitely more interesting and rich version of a human, far beyond a simplistic blanket statement that includes the phrases, “lack of conscience or a harsh super-ego”.

