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Object Relations Theory

“Very few people love others for what they are; rather, they love what they lend them, their own selves, their own idea of them.”

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The reader will be able to:

1. List the principles common to all object relations theories
2. Define the major theorists' views of human motivation and drives
3. Define the major theorists' views of the nature and origin of the ego, id, and superego

Sigmund Freud's drive psychology, like any revolutionary theory, raised as many issues as it explained. Perhaps its biggest shortcoming was that it remained a one-organism psychology. The "objects" in Freud's world were essentially interchangeable. If the parent did not overly neglect or traumatize the infant, he or she would mature according to plan. And since the clinical practice driven by the theory dealt with such disorders as compulsions, phobias, and hysterical conversions, the explanations were mostly sufficient.

The ego psychologists added texture to the model by describing in more detail the intricacies of the structure ego and the

elements of development. They succeeded in beginning to build a general psychology that could explain normal as well as pathological development. In doing so, they accomplished two things. First, they were forced to look more carefully at the particular interpersonal environments of patients and normal children, discovering that caregivers and others were not faceless, but made specific contributions. Second, because of the clinical success of their theories, they brought patients with problems not reducible to Oedipal conflicts into psychoanalysis and began to glimpse the pre-Oedipal nature of some psychopathology and the interpersonal sources of much psychic distress. These developments forced theorists to think more precisely about the role of others in the development of the human mind and in the genesis of psychopathology.

The thinkers of the interpersonal school made forays in these directions, but none attracted the critical mass of followers to develop any momentum. Such a nucleus did emerge (primarily in Great Britain) in the 1920s and 1930s and gained both traction and persistence as the object relations school of psychoanalytic theory. Because they were reworking many Freudian ideas, they had to retain his vocabulary and a nominal loyalty to drive theory. Each created his or her own language and focused on the specifics of his or her ideas that differentiated them from the rest. Thus we know these theorists today mostly by their disparities. It is important first to emphasize what is held in common by the object relations theorists before specifying their distinctions.

At its core, each theory maintains that people develop by interacting with real people in their environments, and they develop internal worlds that contain representations of these experiences. These representations shape how infants and children develop, and they shape how adults anticipate and perceive the interpersonal events in their worlds. The nature of these relationships profoundly affects the structures of id, ego, and superego. These experiences are recreated in the transference situation, where they can be analyzed and altered. (See Table 5-1.)

Table 5-1 The differences among the object relations theories include:

- The extent to which they differ with Freud's drive/structure model
- Their definitions of critical developmental issues and events
- Their views of human motivation

TABLE 5-1 *Principles Common to Object Relations Theories*

- Early interactions between infant and caretaker are the foundation of attitudes toward the self and others. The infant develops characteristic interactional patterns and a repertoire of defenses and strengths.
- Problems with early object relations produce troubled adult relationships and a wide range of maladaptive personality characteristics. These early problems typically include early object loss as well as experiences with caretakers who are neglectful, intrusive, *unempathic*, and/or abusive.
- Clinical patients bring their characteristic patterns of interaction into therapy, where they are predictably activated in the transference.
- Therapeutic change in individuals with disturbed object relations results from reparative experiences within the psychotherapy as well as clarifying interpretations.

The theorists who best represent the different approaches to these differences are Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, W.R.D. Fairbairn, Margaret Mahler, and Otto Kernberg.

MELANIE KLEIN: AGGRESSION AND “PHANTASY”

From an epistemological perspective, Melanie Klein (1882–1960) offered a distinct contribution to psychoanalysis. Untrained as a scientist or philosopher, she drew conclusions based not on the recollections of neurotic adults, but on direct observations of children at play and in analysis. Since children could not give words to the abstractions underlying their behavior, she was forced to speculate about their meaning. The theories she devised, rich in imagery and passion, added new depth particularly to considerations of fantasy and aggression. Study of Klein is complicated by the evolution of her ideas over time. For our purposes, we will outline the latest versions of her theories, together with those elements of earlier version that were never rescinded.

For Sigmund Freud, drives existed by themselves; the entities to which they attached themselves became objects by definition. Klein could not accept this model and held that drives

are inherently object-directed. Even an infant cannot experience libido without a libidinal object. She soon came to find aggression to be a more influential force than libido in childhood development. Both aggression and libido, in her view, are bound to specific objects. Further, emotions are not neurotic manifestations of drive impulses, they are inherent features of the drives themselves: libido is loving; aggression is hateful.

Aggression for Klein was manifest in the child's dominant aim to possess and control, and to ultimately destroy the objects in his or her environment. Where Freud had formulated the Oedipal conflict as one of libidinal desire for a prohibited object, Klein saw it as a struggle for power, possession, and destruction. As in the Freudian version, a result of the struggle is the fear of retaliation. For Freud, it was jealous reprisal for possession of the mother; for Klein, angry retribution by the assaulted father. Even further, since Klein saw object-directed aggression at work from birth on, she postulated the existence of a primitive Oedipal complex even in infancy.

Klein's most substantial contribution may have been her new formulation of fantasy. In drive psychology, fantasy was an adaptive substitute for something undesirable in the real environment. In ego psychology, it was a modality for organizing perceptions. Klein instead viewed it as the singular substrate of all mental processes. She defined an inborn, unconscious function, whose content and images are phylogenetically inherited. Fantasy could be seen as the mental representation of drive instinct. Fantasy, Klein maintained, was primary, and the infant was born with a densely populated object world. Perceptions of real persons were distorted to fit the templates of this inner world.

Klein outlined the stages of development into what she called "positions," defining constellations of phantasy and emotion.

- The *paranoid position* (later called the *paranoid-schizoid position*) occupies the first three months of life. The infant organizes phantasies and experiences into good and bad objects. The homogeneity of these objects leaves the child vulnerable to abandonment or destruction, hence the paranoia.
- By the second quarter of the first year, the child enters the *depressive position*. Klein posits that the child at this stage begins to realize that the good and bad mother are the same person, but still believes in the destructive power of his or

her own aggressive impulses. As a result, the child is fearful of the effects of his or her hostile wishes on the object of libidinal attachment.



MS. GRAY directed aggressive impulses toward her mother for failing to resist and deflect her father's cruelty. Worried that this aggression hurt her mother and the internalized representation of her mother, she is left with a predisposition to depressed feelings. Unable to tolerate the internal consequences of this hostility, she directs it at multiple external objects, which play symbolic roles in her phantasy world.

The depressive position is never fully resolved, and psychological life is a continuing pursuit of reparation for the harm done. The entire Oedipal complex is now a vehicle for undoing the effects of depressive anxiety. In less fortunate individuals, the picture is even more complicated as unresolved remnants of the paranoid position restrict the available range of mental operations.

Since Klein's link between drives and objects was so fundamental, it required a reformulation of the mental structures that housed them. Ego was no longer a developmental outgrowth of the conflict between aggression and libido within the id. Instead, ego was a medium for love and connection; id, for hate and destruction. Both, therefore, had to be present from birth. For Freud, the central conflict was between drive and reality. For Klein it was a war between love and hate.

MARGARET MAHLER: SEPARATION AND INDIVIDUATION

Margaret Mahler (1897–1985) was a pediatrician before becoming a psychoanalyst. Like Klein, she informed her hypotheses with direct observations of children. Her work addressed the question of the sources of human individuality. She was attracted to Hartmann's notions of adaptation and extended them to describe adaptation to the interpersonal, human environment.

Mahler outlined phases of human psychological development.

- *Normal autism*, occupying just the first few weeks of life, is focused on satisfying needs and reducing discomfort or

tension. The infant uses hallucinations to gratify his or her wishes until they are fulfilled in actuality; reality testing is nonexistent.

- The *normal symbiotic phase* lasts from about the ages of 4 weeks to 4 months. The developing body becomes more aware of external stimuli. The infant is aware of the mother, but identifies her as a single unit with himself or herself. Experiences are classified as either good or bad, and memory traces begin to get laid down consistent with those divisions.
- *Separation-individuation* characterizes the remainder of human psychological development. Separation is the emergence of the child from symbiotic unity; individuation is the acquisition of personal characteristics. This large phase is divided into four subphases:
 - *Differentiation*—From ages 5 to 10 months, the child perceives himself or herself as distinct from mother and eventually separates mother from others.
 - *Practicing*—From about 10 to 18 months of age, the child, who can now crawl and explore, expands his or her sphere of interest. Mahler specifically identifies upright locomotion as the marker of the “psychological birth” of the child. While in love with the world around, the child frequently returns to mother as home base.
 - *Rapprochement*—From 18 to about 30 months of age, the child begins to realize that mother is a truly separate person. The development of language helps the child bridge this potentially frightening gap. As reality testing improves, infantile grandiosity wanes, but frustration rises. As the child alternates between intense need for mother and hostile rejection of her, splitting becomes the primary adaptive mechanism.
 - *Libidinal object constancy*—The rest of life entails the merging of split object representations. The child, and later the adult, learns that persons in the environment remain constant even as experiences with them vary from good to bad.

Like Hartmann, Mahler conceived of an originally undifferentiated matrix of id and ego components. For Hartmann, the need to survive in the physical world drove the evolution of the ego. For Mahler, objects constituted anything that had contact

with the child. Objects were not tied to drives. The symbiotic investment in the object, particularly the mother, gave rise to the evolution of libido out of a previously undifferentiated matrix of drive energy. Hostility directed at objects outside the symbiotic circle gave rise to the differentiation of aggression. Ego arose when the child was able to await and expect satisfaction, which originally could come only from others, i.e., with the beginning of the capacity for memory.

The origin of the ego and the differentiation of libido, from their respective undifferentiated matrices, thus requires a reliable other. If the hungry infant is not fed or if the crying infant is not soothed, there is no positive object experience to serve as the core of libido; no positive memory traces can be established to serve as foundation for ego. Mahler referred to the “ordinarily devoted mother” who could fulfill these criteria, and more generally to the “average expectable environment” which was necessary for normal development.



MR. BROWN successfully separated from mother. In the process of individuation, he experienced her as somewhat inadequate by virtue of her passivity. The tense and unemotional family environment failed to provide a sufficient anchor for his developing libidinal attachments. His repetitive adult behavior mirrors the child's need for rapprochement. He retains a high degree of dependency on external objects for validation, and he struggles for libidinal object constancy.

W.R.D. FAIRBAIRN: OBJECT-SEEKING AND MOTIVATION

W.R.D. (Ronald) Fairbairn (1889–1964), working in relative isolation in Scotland, had more influence posthumously than he did in life on the British School of object relations. From the beginning, he doubted the drive theory of motivation. To his observation, libido is object-seeking, not pleasure seeking. The pursuit of pleasure and sexual gratification is only a vehicle for connection to others. He saw no need for a structure id, but considered the ego to be the container of psychic energies; it is a set of organizing and mediating functions, all in pursuit of object relations. Where aggression exists, it is a reaction to libidinal frustration, not an impulse of its own.

From these principles it follows that development is not a matter of structure-building as it was for the drive and ego psychologists, but an evolution in modes of relating.

- *Infantile dependence* is characterized by the child's sense of merger with mother. The world and the self are a single object. The infant's survival depends on mother's presence and attunement.
- The *transitional stage* constitutes a long process of separation. Relationships emerge based on differentiation and exchange. Relinquishing the merger of infantile dependence, the child fears the loss of objects.
- *Mature dependence* features a healthy, mutual interdependence between adults. The selfishness of infantile dependence and the barter of the transitional phase give way to the altruistic generosity of adulthood. Of course, the transition is never complete and the insecurities of the transitional phase are present throughout life.



MS. WHITE successfully traversed the early stages of development. Now she struggles to achieve the ideal of mature dependence. On the one hand, what seemed like altruistic devotion to motherhood when her children were at home now feels more like hurtful over-involvement. The altered marital boundaries since her husband's retirement challenge her to define the extent of her dependency on him.

The natural, or primary, objects of the ego are other people. But reality interferes with the mother–infant bond and requires the creation of internal objects. To contain the bad or frustrating objects, the ego splits. The *central ego* consists of positive objects and experiences; it constitutes the conscious, relational aspects of ego function. The exciting, provocative image of mother, intensely attractive, is split into an exciting object, which is contained in the *libidinal ego*. The unavailable mother gives rise to a frustrating object representation, contained in the *anti-libidinal ego*. If object relations remain unsatisfactory, the splits persist; otherwise (and normally) they merge into a healthy ego and object world.

Psychopathology, for Fairbairn, reflected the basic struggle between intense longings for contact and the irreconcilable features of others in external reality. If the ego is forced to remain

fragmented to maintain contact with the split representations of others, a genuine self cannot emerge. (See Chapter 6.)

Thus, therapy must be aimed at unifying the split elements of ego. The patient, despite his or her fear of being re-traumatized, must come to experience the therapist as a good object. With a strong, real, and transference relationship, the therapist helps the patient surrender bad objects from repression, loosen the libidinal ties to them, and reattach them into an integrated, genuine adult self. (See Chapter 8.)

D.W. WINNICOTT: THE TRUE AND FALSE SELVES

Donald W. Winnicott (1896–1971), like Margaret Mahler, was originally a pediatrician. Even though he practiced psychoanalysis with psychotic adults, he rejected Freud's view of the depravity of mankind. Instead, he saw human nature as basically good. From his observations of children and their mothers, he emphasized the role of the specific interpersonal environment in shaping that nature for better or worse. A substantial number of his phrases and the ideas connected to children and their mothers, have become part of the permanent psychological vocabulary.

"There is no such thing as a baby without a mother," he declared. There exists instead a nursing couple, bonded more by emotion than by the physical tie of Mahler's stage of symbiosis. Proper development requires *good enough mothering*, which entails the beginning a stage of *primary maternal preoccupation* and lasting two to three weeks. For the first few months of life, the mother is intensely attuned to the child's desires. She provides a *holding environment* in which the child is protected from discomfort. Further, she anticipates the baby's needs as the infant is on the verge of summoning them up in fantasy. She also provides a mirror for the baby, confirming his or her existence; and a non-demanding presence during times of rest so the child can simply exist, allowing spontaneous gestures to emerge to which the mother can respond. Briefly, Winnicott describes a requirement for perfect mothering, with flawless and constant attunement to the infant's unspoken wishes. Once the mother has fostered this illusion of omnipotence, her inevitable failures can allow the infant to learn about reality.

The developing child soon evolves needs for object relationships separate from early drive needs. The maternal position, her attitudes, and emotions, become more important than the content of her gratifications. Such object relations become structuralized into the self. If the mother does not protect the omnipotent illusion, or if she intrudes on the formless, quiet periods with needs of her own, the child develops a *false self*, compliant and adaptive to the parental needs and expectations. Because the baby is still dependent on its mother for survival, the *true self* must be buried.



MR. BROWN lacked the “good enough mothering” that would have allowed him to consolidate his true self. His preoccupied and distracted parents were insufficiently attuned to foster his sense of omnipotence and guide him through its expectable frustrations. In an attempt at repair, he imitates his father; but this imitation represents a pursuit of a false self. The conflict between true and false selves is manifest in his social timidity and his professional pattern of self defeat.

In growing from infantile omnipotence to an adaptive relationship with the external world, the child makes use of language and motor functions. Importantly, he or she also relies on a *transitional object*. This object (often something like a blanket or teddy bear) occupies a vague space between illusion and reality. The infant imagines a breast he or she can create out of wishing alone; the toddler knows he or she has to ask for things that may or may not be forthcoming. The transitional object sits between these stages. It is not entirely illusory and it does not belong completely to the cold, external world. Neither the child nor the parent questions its source or its nature. Adults outside the intimate circle of parent and child regard the attachment as cute, though irrational. Significantly, since the transitional object is the first creation of the child’s mind, it may be seen as the beginning of human creativity.

While Winnicott professed allegiance to Freud’s model, he relegates the drives to a marginal position compared with the need for connection; and he has little use for the structures of id and ego. Aggression is not a primary drive but a direct result of frustration of libidinal wishes. A failure of good enough mothering prevents the emergence of the true self, and most psychopathology repre-

sents a stage of developmental arrest at the point where proper parenting would have facilitated the emergence of the true self, or at the stage where parental needs forced the naissance of elements of the false self. (See Chapter 6.)

Psychoanalytic cure for Winnicott required the direct provision of missing developmental needs. In the holding environment of the therapy, the patient would experience the freedom to make contact with his or her true self and rid himself or herself of the fixations of the false self. (See Chapter 8.)

OTTO KERNBERG: THE BORDERLINE MIND

Otto Kernberg (1928–) emerged in the late 20th century as the leading spokesperson for object relations theory. Using the language of the drive model, he presented the conclusions he drew from extensive work with patients with borderline and narcissistic personalities. His theories emphasize the centrality of affect and the profound importance of splitting, in development and experience.

Kernberg's system is built on the *basic relational unit*: the image of the object, the image of the self, and the affect in play (derived from the drive which is active at the time). The infant, the toddler, and the child progress through multiple such experiences in the process of forming psychic structures and personality.

- Early on, the infant internalizes these experiences by *introjection*, in which self and object are hardly differentiated and the affect is a violent and unmodified drive derivative.
- Later, introjection is replaced by *identification*, in which the child is able to appreciate the separate roles played by self and object, and affect is somewhat modulated.
- *Ego identity*, the most mature form of internalization, organizes the particular elements of self and object under the synthetic functions of the fully formed ego; affect is well modulated.

In the earliest stages of existence, drive energy is undifferentiated and physiologically determined. In the course of accumulating relational experiences, the affective coloration of each basic relational unit, love or hate, identifies it as good or bad. The objects within each unit become invested with drive energy, which then

sorts itself into libido and aggression, depending on the affective context of the associated experiences. Hate exists before aggression; love, before libido. The drives serve as organizers of the internalized relational units.



MS. GRAY'S early relational experiences were colored by extremely negative affects of fear and sadness, more of hate than of love. These experiences were organized into a deep reservoir of aggressive drive energy. The aggression is so intense, and the experiences of love have been so rare, that she has remained unable to merge her adult perception of others beyond this primitive splitting. The lack of modulation has blocked the formation of an effective adult ego, preventing the perception of others in her environment as constant figures. Instead she perceives people according to the affective tone of the moment.

In infancy, there are originally no psychic structures. Perception is a function of a forerunner of the ego. Ego is born as a product of introjection of object experiences. As ego introjects multiple pleasant and unpleasant images, desirable and frightening emotions, it must repress those which are too upsetting to maintain in awareness. This repository becomes the id. Superego is a later differentiation, providing the locus of hostile, punitive images as well as lofty ego ideals. Eventually, splitting becomes an untenable process and the ego progresses to ambivalence, holding simultaneous good and bad properties of an object in a single representation. (See Figure 5-1.)

Although Kernberg's model uses Freud's terms and superficially espouses loyalties to the drive model, it in fact turns drive theory upside down. For Kernberg, object relations are primary; they exist before any of the structures. Affects flow directly from the nature of the object experiences and are managed primarily by splitting. These experiences actually create the drives. Since affect and splitting are ego functions, the ego creates the id out of repressed drive derivatives. This model, though complicated and cumbersome, offers more complete explanations of pre-Oedipal function and severe adult pathology than any prior system. It represents the apotheosis of the evolution of object relations theories in its replacement of nearly all principles of drive psychology.

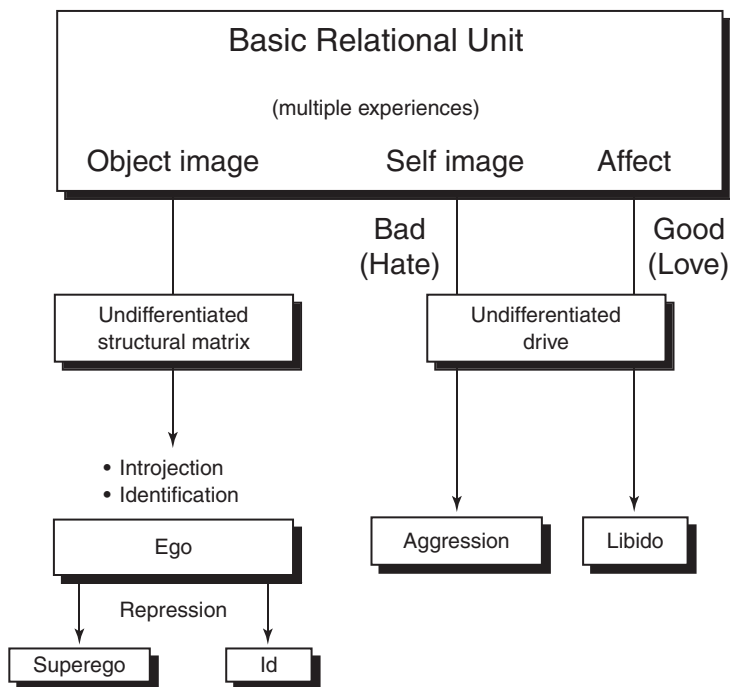


FIGURE 5-1 ■ Kernberg's Model of Drive and Structure

REFINEMENT OF THE THEORIES

The evolution of ego psychology made it necessary for theorists to direct their attention to the world surrounding the developing and functioning individual. The object relations theorists jumped to this task. Sharing the principles of the role of others in shaping the person, they derived different schemes of drive and structure, ranging from the modest modifications of Klein and Mahler to the near-complete rejection of the drive-structure model by Winnicott and Kernberg. (See Table 5-2.) These diverse views persist without much accommodation. The increasing complexity and idiosyncrasies required to support the object relations theories made them inaccessible to many practitioners and epistemologically undesirable to many theorists. These considerations contributed to the alternative, or parallel, development of the school of self psychology.

TABLE 5-2 *Comparison of Major Object Relations Theories*

<i>Theorist</i>	<i>Origin and Role of Drives</i>	<i>Origin and Role of Structures</i>	<i>Major Developmental Themes</i>
Melanie Klein	Aggressive and libidinal drives are inborn. They are separate from birth. Drives are inherently object-directed. Aggression is much more powerful and important than libido.	Id and ego are present in nearly mature states from birth. They serve to meet the demands of the drives	Conflict between love and hate is central to all development. Phantasies are inborn and evolve to contain images of objects and to manage the conflict of love and hate.
Margaret Mahler	Drives originate in an undifferentiated matrix. Symbiotic investment in objects gives rise to libido. Hostility to objects outside the symbiotic sphere differentiates into aggression.	Structures originate in an undifferentiated matrix. Ego results from maturation of memory and the ability to obtain gratification from objects. Id is what is left behind.	Separation and individuation follow a predictable pattern. Development relies on the availability of dependable objects.
W.R.D. Fairbairn	There are no drives in the traditional sense. The child naturally strives for libidinal connection. Aggressive urges arise when this aim is frustrated.	There is no id, only ego. The frustration of impulses toward connection leads to splits in the ego.	Modes of relating to objects become more complex and mature. Development of drives and structures is irrelevant.
D.W. Winnicott	Libido is primary and is present from birth. The frustration of libido directs some of its energy into the creation of the aggressive drive.	Relations with objects yield the formation of a true self and a false self. Id and ego are irrelevant.	Object relations become independent aims of development, separate from drive-based needs. The reconciliation of true and false selves defines the individual.
Otto Kernberg	The child is born with unmodified and undifferentiated drive energy. Experiences with objects, colored by affective context, separates aggression from libido.	Affects and perception exist before structures. Experiences with objects are organized by introjection and identification into the structure ego. Unacceptable elements of experience are split and repressed into the structure id.	Affects are organized by relational experiences. Primitive splitting is replaced by more adaptive modes of containing hate and obtaining love.

Learning Points

- All object relations theories describe an internal object world that results from early experience with others in the environment.
- Melanie Klein emphasized the role of aggression and phylogenetically inherited “phantasy” in shaping the object world.
- Margaret Mahler described the process by which the child separates from mother and becomes an individual.
- W.R.D. Fairbairn emphasized that drives are inherently object-seeking.
- D.W. Winnicott introduced the concepts of “good enough mothering,” the “holding environment,” and the “transitional object.”
- Otto Kernberg emphasized the roles of affect and splitting in the origins of drive and structure.

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