Object Relations Theory

The major Psychodynamic Theory in use today
What is an “Object”

- The human brain is wired to look for patterns or categories (organizing sensations)
- The first patterns that the infant discovers are:
  - Me – Not Me
  - Pleasurable – Frustrating
  - Male – Female
What is an “Object”

- Melanie Klein (the founder of Object Relations Theory) said that infants internalize, or swallow whole, into their unconscious psyche, categories or representations of reality. These are known as “introjects” or “objects”

- These Introjects (Objects) are used as templates to interpret other sensations or experiences in life. (e.g. – Mother Object is used to interpret experiences with other older females)
Melanie Klein’s Theory

- All infants “split”
- Splitting is looking at an object as either all good or all bad based upon the present experience of that object
  - 1st Object is the Breast (later generalized to the mother)
  - If the breast is full of yummy milk – providing pleasure to the child – then that breast is the “Good Breast Object”
  - If the breast happens to be empty – then the baby is frustrated – and that breast is seen as the “Bad Breast Object”
- It is not until a child matures that they come to see that both objects are the same thing!! Mature people no longer see things as all good or all bad – but see that everyone is a mixture of good and bad
Melanie Klein’s Theory

• Rather than emphasize libido – Klein emphasized the aggressive/death instinct of the psyche – “Thanatos”
• She emphasized that a child will feel ambivalent toward a loved object, because sometimes that object frustrates the child
• If the child experiences frustration with an object (the empty breast, mom not getting that the diaper is wet, the dog knocking over the toddler), the child will split that object, seeing it as all bad in that moment
• The Aggressive instinct causes the child to “kill” that object in fantasy. This is called the Paranoid-Schizoid Position.
Melanie Klein’s Theory

- When the child has killed the bad object in fantasy, the child feels instantly sad! It has just killed the mommy that it loves.
- This sad state is known as the Depressive Position
- The sadness motivates the child to re-integrate the good object back into the bad object by an act of love
- “Hate/Aggression splits and Love Unites”
- E.g. – my son doing “Eye Shoots” at me, and later bringing me some dandelions he picked as a present
The implications of Object Relations Theory

- Sometimes we relate to others based upon prior experience with someone else – e.g. instantly disliking someone (because we are using an Introject of someone else from our past)
- We also have a Self Object – if we fail to love ourselves (re-integrating our Bad Self with our Good Self) we may develop Borderline Personality – an unstable sense of self – seeing self as having to be either all good (perfect), or all bad if we do one bad thing
Donald Winnicott’s Theory of Object Relations

- Winnicott did not emphasize either libido or thanatos in his theory. Instead, he focused on the development of the Self Object out of our relationship with the mother.
- He adopted the concept of “Mirroring” from Heinz Kohut – that we develop our sense of self-worth from the pleasure we see in our mother’s face when she looks into our eyes
  - As an infant, we see ourselves through our mother’s eyes
  - A normal person develops “normal narcissism”
  - Therapy re-creates the mother-child relationship to build the neurotic person’s sense of self-worth
**Good-Enough Mothering**

- Winnicott said that in order to develop a true sense of Self, the child must experience “Good-Enough Mothering” – a mother who usually is in tune with what the child wants, but not always!
- If the mother IS in tune with the child – then the child will feel “omnipotent”, as though they can effect changes in the world around them
  - E.g. – the child is hungry, they cry, magically a bottle appears to meet their need. This mother is in tune. The child feels able to make things happen in the world. They feel real!
Good-Enough Mothering

- However, if the mother is not in tune with the child:
  - The child will not develop a sense of omnipotence
  - The child will feel frustrated, because they are unable to get their needs met consistently
  - The child will start to focus on what the mother wants – how to get the mother’s attention, how to be what the mother wants, in order to get their needs met
  - This is the origin of the development of the False Self instead of the True Self
  - The False Self give the person a feeling of emptiness, of not being real
Good-Enough Mothering

- Conversely, if the mother is TOO good, never frustrates the child, the child will also fail to develop a true sense of Self.
- This is because, if the child never feels frustrated, they continue to feel like they are an extension of the mother (mom-me one entity). The child does not develop independence. The child remains fused or dependent on the mother.
- This is another kind of False Self that develops
Transitional Objects

- The universal practice of children attaching to a special object is explained by Winnicott.
- The young child relies on the mother to meet their needs. When the mother is gone, the object represents the mother to the child, and gives the child confidence that they are “omnipotent” and can take care of themselves in the absence of the mother.
Disorders explained by Object Relations

- Borderline Personality – continuation of infantile splitting, without learning to integrate through love
- DID – splitting self into multiple objects
- Dissociative Fugue – splitting off the previous life as a bad self object
- Depersonalization Disorder – the development of a False Self – so don’t feel real, or able to effect change