OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY and Implications in Couples Therapy

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ABSTRACT:

OR theory offers the therapist a window into the “inner world” of mental representations, how one represents, perceives and understands their world and their relationship in it, that enables a counsellor to explore the client’s behaviour and motivations (deepest unmet needs/longings). Such past representations seem to serve as emotional filters; colouring and shaping current intrapsychic perceptions and interpsychic relationships. Such relational perceptions best serve the therapeutic alliance and offer the analyst & analysands insights into what drives the couple’s relationship.
INTRODUCTION

Object relations (OR) theory is an individual psychology that views the personality as a system of parts in interaction with significant others in the environment. It is an amalgam of theories or set of psychodynamic precepts that address how people internalize and externalize relationships; as well as a sound theoretical approach which systematically develops a clear concept of ‘personality’ sufficient to challenge Freud’s instinctual and structural theories.

OR theorists such as Melanie Klein, W.R.D. Fairbairn, D.W. Winnicott, Margaret Mahler, Edith Jacobson, Otto Kernberg, and Heinz Kohut began departing from the classical Freudian model when they re-examined and questioned instinctual drive theory through investigations of early formation and differentiation of psychological structures (inner images of the self and the Other, or object) and how these inner structures manifest in interpersonal situations. Their primary focus was on relationships of early life that leave lasting impressions; similar to a residue or remnant within the psyche of the interaction. These residues of past relationships (inner object relations) served to shape perceptions of both individuals and relationships. Scharff & Scharff (1992, 100-01) summarize it best in their Fairbairnian quote of ego structure: “The structure is seen as one consisting of a system of conscience and unconscious object relationships that crystallise out of the infants experience of real relationships. “Ego structure is the trace of a relationship.””

In OR theory, it is these traces, this “inner world” of mental representations, how one represents, perceives and understands their world and their relationship in it, that enables a counsellor to explore the client’s behaviour and motivations (deepest unmet needs/longings). Such past representations seem to serve as emotional filters; colouring and shaping current intrapsychic perceptions and interpsychic relationships.

HOW DOES O.R. THEORY DIFFER FROM CLASSICAL (DRIVE) THEORY?

At the centre of the OR theorists’ disagreement with Freud, is the relative weight given to innate biological factors in shaping the personality as opposed to the influence of relationships; prompting theorists to focus on preoedipal development as explained in terms of self representation and object representation and gave emphasis to environmental influences rather than innate influences. OR theorists also viewed disturbance quite differently from the classical Freudian model.

According to Ogen (1983) and Sternbach (1983), these central differences gave rise to at least four main departures from classical theory: (1) the nature of objects and the shift from Freud’s emphasis on instinctual drives; (2) the nature and formation of psychic structure; (3) developmental stages in terms of relationships with objects; and, (4) views of conflict and the consequences for therapy.
These four divergences are best contrasted in the following table:

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<tr>
<th>Classical &quot;drive&quot; theory (Freudian)</th>
<th>Object Relations theory</th>
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<td><strong>The nature of objects</strong></td>
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<td>In Freud’s theory, there are no preordained ties to people. The drives precede the object and even “create” the object by the experience of satisfaction and frustration. Freud saw the object as satisfying the impulse.</td>
<td>Klein attributed greater import to the interpersonal environment as a determining influence on the developing personality. Fairbairn proposed that the main drive that a person has is a drive for a relationship, not the satisfaction of biological instinct. He viewed personality and its motivation in terms of interpersonal transactions rather than biological instincts.</td>
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<td><strong>Nature and formation of psychic structure</strong></td>
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<td>Freud’s concept of psychic structure was a hypothetical construct (psychological organisation) of constituent parts of the person. Freud described these as the id, the ego, and the superego. For Freud, each of these parts of the personality were either reliant on or moderated some of the others, i.e. the ego continues to be dependent on the id for energy; i.e. the ego mediates between the id and the superego.</td>
<td>OR theorists challenged the traditional Freudian understanding of structure as they looked to the influence of external objects to build internal psychic organisation. Organisation and building up of the personality results from internalisation, a mental process by which an individual transforms regulatory interactions and characteristics of his/her environment into inner regulations and characteristics.</td>
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<td><strong>Developmental stages model</strong></td>
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<td>Freud’s developmental model centred on the progressive appearance of instinctual energy in bodily zones. In particular, the oedipal stage is a period of innovation as the child’s turns from a two-person relationship to a three-person relationship.</td>
<td>OR theories examined developmental processes and relationships prior to the oedipal period and perceive the crucial developmental issue and critical timing when psychic structures are formed as being the child’s move from the state of fusion and dependence on the mother to a state of increased independence and increased differentiation. During the preoedipal and early oedipal years, a child’s object relations do not seem to be between the id and objects or between the ego and objects but rather between the self and objects.</td>
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<td><strong>Conflict and disturbance</strong></td>
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<td>The classical Freudian model understood psychological disturbance as conflict between instinctual demands and the demands of reality and conflict among the id, the ego, and the super ego. The unresolved conflicts of childhood continued unconsciously and emerged during adulthood. As the ego defensively responded to threatening thoughts and libidinal feelings, a neurotic compromise is reached that manifests itself in neurotic symptoms. The Freudian analyst sought to underscore the unconscious courses of the neurotic symptoms.</td>
<td>OR theorists defined conflict and disturbance differently, and they locate pathology differently within the psyche. Psychological disturbance involved damage to the self and structure of psyche. These developmental deficits then hindered building a cohesive self and prevented the integration of psychic structures. Preoedipal developmental deficits resulted in narcissistic and borderline personalities, which were seen as more serious disturbances to the classical neurosis diagnosis.</td>
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WHAT IS OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY?

Humanity is in relationship from the beginning, and like many living things, we attempt to protect ourselves, our integrity as an organism, and the primary object of our attachment. Infancy, seen in the context of relationships from birth, promulgated OR theorists to see life’s central motivation as ‘object seeking’. The ‘object’ mentioned refers, not so much to some inhuman thing, but more usually to someone toward who a desire or action is directed. The object can refer both to an external person or an inner object (an introject), which is a mental representation of the actual observable personage (or experience).

To this end, relationships become central to psychological life, and anxiety is thought to play a significant role in relationships by warning of impending (threatened) loss of the self in relation to the object. Avoiding damage to the Self and protection from narcissistic injury of the ego drives a complex personality structural organizational process; reflecting multiple identifications and counter identifications with parts of others, organised in conscious and unconscious areas of the psyche. Scharff and Scharff (1992, 101) explain it in this way:

The conscious parts remain in an open system, flexible and changeable, and able to interact freely with others. The unconscious parts are split off into a closed system, rigid and unchanging under the force of repression, and not available for interaction with others or for learning and change at the conscious level. Conscious and unconscious parts are inconstant dynamic interaction with each other internally. Needs, frustrations, longings, love, and hate are reexperienced inside the self. These effects characterise the exciting and rejecting object relationships that were internalised and that continue to interact dynamically within the overall personality. These inner relationships are being actively repressed and are equally actively seeking to return to consciousness.

OR theorists propose that, to remove ourselves from discomfort or danger, we project our innate destructiveness onto the environment and ‘introject’ its good aspects. Reciprocally, we project the good aspects onto the good object and experience ourselves. Thus, we tend to split our self-and-object world into all-good and all-bad camps, and in this way, the good self-object relation is protected and anxiety avoided at a rudimentary level via splitting and introjection.

Siegel (1991, 72) explaining Grotstein (1981) suggests that splitting operates as a means of achieving differentiation, and as such, is a normal psychic function. An infant’s focus is on the need to distinguish and separate from a background ‘object’, allowing for the splitting off of aspects of self and others:

This primitive defense mechanism serves to separate the idealized elements of the representational world from those aspects of self and objects that are tinged with disillusionment rage. Ideally, good self and object representations outweigh the bad, allowing the developmental challenge of rapprochment to be successfully completed. As splitting recedes, new representations that contain both good and bad aspects emerge... as splitting resolves, whole object relations become central to mature functioning in normal development.
Kernberg (1974), influenced by Jacobson (1964), from his analytic studies of adult patients concluded that infants develop through phases of a split internal world and gradually shift toward whole object relatedness.

Besides emphasizing object relatedness, splitting and reparation, Klein (1946) was the first to introduce the concept of **projective identification**, described as projection onto the other person of parts of the self that a person wants either to preserve or get rid of. Waska (2000a, 33) quoting Segal (1974) offers this description:

In projective identification parts of the self and internal objects are split off and projected into the external object, which then becomes possessed by, controlled and identified with the projected parts. Projective identification has manifold aims: it may be directed toward the ideal object to **avoid separation**, or it may be directed toward the bad object to **gain control** of the source of danger. Various parts of the self may be projected, with various aims: bad parts of the self may be projected in order to **get rid of them** as well as to **attack and destroy** the object, good parts may be projected to avoid separation or to **keep them safe** from bad things inside or to **improve the external object** through a kind of primitive projective reparation. [Italics mine]

As is evident, there is an attempt to control, manipulate, or change the projected quality in the other person; the person who projects then must maintain a relationship with the other person to control those projected parts through controlling that person. The projector attempts to induce in the receiver that behaviour which is consistent with the projected aspect. It is especially important for the receiver of the projection to have a part of herself that can be provoked. For the part of the receiver to be readily provokable, it must be unacceptable and therefore split off or repressed by the receiver. Evidently, there is an interpersonal concomitant to projective identification; it then reinternalises the now-modified projected part so that it can be “assimilated” by the projector. Both parties can feel that the projector has actually put something in to the object receiver.

Most importantly, projective identification provides counsellors with the necessary bridging concept to extend the individual psychology of OR theory to the interpersonal situation and the reinternalisation process, as part of the entire experience with projective identification, provides the opportunity for change in internal structures. In this next section, we’ll turn our attention to how this concept outworks in couples therapy.

**PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION AND PRINCIPLES OF TREATMENT IN COUPLES THERAPY**

The development of marital intimacy requires a reorganization of the representational world, originally formed in childhood, which has continued to be shaped by the individual's experiences. The individual attaches special meaning and value to the spouse, often projecting onto the spouse properties of the existing self- and object-representational world. Therefore, the dynamics of spouse relationships cannot
be understood without attending to the ways spouses have learned to perceive, interpret, and attach meaning to their interactions in early family experiences as well as in the current relationship.

Middleberg (2001, 341) extends Feldman’s (1979) view that “marital conflict may serve to prevent the emergence of intimacy anxiety” and proposes that “the purpose of some common marital dances, including conflict, …serves as a collusive defense for certain couples against the anxiety that is created by the stimulation of internal representations and emotions during intimacy.” She further identifies some couples who incorporate the defenses of splitting and projective identification into their dances in order to defend against intimacy anxieties; thereby externalizing and transposing internal conflicts into interpersonal conflicts.

Referring to Solomon’s (1989) earlier work, Middleberg concurs that couples use their dance to maintain a comfort zone or a balance between the poles of intimacy and separateness. Furthermore, she suggests that the couple's behaviors help them to maintain a homeostasis; defenses against intimacy are triggered when the marital system becomes “too hot”, and efforts to connect are triggered when the system becomes “too cold”. “These couples”, Middleberg insists, “have constraints to change because of poorly developed representations of self and relationships, they will be limited in their ability to make or maintain change without the development of a cohesive self and resolution of splitting and projective identification. Projective identification changes the marital interaction by transposing the internal conflict into an interpersonal conflict and leads to polarized perceptions, which interfere with empathy and collaborative behaviors.” (2001, 343)

McCormack (2004, 82, 83) claims acting-out behaviours signal that the spouse(s) is experiencing a threat to the sense of self and a loss of observing ego: as such, therapeutic interventions must “establish a holding environment that allows time and space for each spouse to be with his/her experience as opposed to discharging it via acting out. This is only accomplished by the therapist entering into alternating separate therapist-and-spouse dyadic interactions, with the expressed intention of: (1) identifying and processing with each spouse what his or her experience was that threatened the “self”, and/or (2) clarifying and deepening the therapist’s understanding of what each spouse is trying to communicate.” McCormack explains further that a counsellor’s identifies empathetically with each spouse through a process of successive approximations; and through the effective use of clarifying questions, trial identifications and rejectable interpretations, the counsellor repeatedly explores, tries on for size, and struggles to understand what each spouse is communicating of their experience. Middleberg (2001, 347) tends to agree:

In making interpretations of the projective identification, it is essential that the therapist present an empathic understanding of why the defense was necessary and why the defense still feels necessary to protect against intolerable affects and overwhelming anxiety. If the therapist’s interpretations cause the client to feel more shame, then the defense will not only remain, but it will be reinforced. However, if the interpretation can allow the client to feel compassion and empathy for the need to defend, the client is more likely to feel safe to explore the underlying feeling and develop empathy for that aspect of self.
The overriding objective of the counsellor is to identify with the experience of each spouse, forming and reforming these projective identifications into increasingly finer attunement with what the spouse experiences. The projective identification "task" is the unconscious and conscious effort the counsellor makes to understand the nature of the client's projections and how the client re-identifies with those projected fantasies. This requires the counsellor's complete understanding of the client's internal cast of characters, their complex and ever-changing dynamics, and the subsequent translations of these elements via interpretations. It also usually entails a detoxification and modification of the projected materials before a translation can occur.

Once empathic connections are established, the process of therapy becomes one of a fluid shifting between an interpersonal focus of spouse-to-spouse relatedness, and an intrapsychic focus via the use of separate counsellor-to-spouse dyadic interactions that allow for the processing of each spouse's transference as it becomes manifest in the interpersonal dynamics of the spouse-to-spouse interaction. The counsellor’s goal is to weave the disparate strands of the self and internal object representations into a coherent whole by bringing them to consciousness, where they can be thought about and where past can be differentiated from present; with the ultimate goal of helping spouses communicate their experience to each other without blame, shame, or attack, and without demands for change. As self-understanding increases, so does their capacity to relate.

CONCLUSIONS

Object Relations theory can and does help clients to gain insights into their use of splitting and projective identification in two important ways. First, clients develop an understanding of the role that projective identification has played in the maintenance of both the couple dance and their intrapsychic functioning. Second, clients come to understand the origins of their defenses and how they were adaptive at an earlier point in time but now are interfering with adapting to the current inter-psychic context and satisfying their needs for intimacy.

The counsellor’s task through all of this is to renew the developmental journey of each spouse by first uncovering the individual issues which undergird the collusive dance and then resolving these, so that collusive defense(s) are no longer necessary, and the partners are free to change their position in the dance. The counsellor must understand, modify, and interpret the client's projections in such a way that allows the client to identify with them in a new light. Hostility and hatred often accompany the conflicts brought into the dance(s), and projective identification is frequently the mode of transportation. If properly understood, however, projective identification can also be the primary vehicle for the working-through process.
Bibliography


