

## Object Relations Theory

Freud proposed “Instincts have four basic characteristics:

- (1) a *source* in some bodily deficit [sexual deprivation]
- (2) an *aim*—gratification of the need [i.e., release of sexual energy]
- (3) an *impetus* that propels the person to act
- (4) an *object* through which the instinct achieves its aim.

### Melanie Klein

1882 - 1960

After Freud, the most important influence on modern psychoanalysis

"The earliest experiences of the infant are split between wholly good ones with 'good' objects and wholly bad experiences with 'bad' objects." Laplanche & Jean-Bertrand

**Object** means another person.

**Self:** An internal image. Conscious and unconscious mental representations of oneself as a person.

**Mental representation:** is the internal, mental representation of an object or of the self in relation to that object

**External Object:** an actual person in the world that a person has invested with emotional energy

**Internal Object:** a person's mental representation of such a person. The most important internal object is of the mother as experienced by a small child.

**Self-representation:** A person's inner representation of himself or herself as experienced in relation to a significant other (i.e., object).

There are different points of view amongst object relations theorists regarding:

1. How these mental representations develop
2. How these representations impacts a person
3. Its implications for personality development.

### **W.R.D. Fairbairn**

1889 - 1964

Concerned with the **relationships between people** than with the “**drives**” within them.

Early relationships with parents shapes the emotional life of the child and determines the emotional experiences that the child will have later in life, because the early libidinal objects become the prototypes for all later experience of connection with others.

**Introject** (i.e., mentally take in)

**Splitting** (i.e., keeping apart good and bad experiences)  
A primitive Ego Defense Mechanism

**Internal Object for Mother**

“Ideal Mother: Good Object  
“Bad Mother: Rejected Object”

**Self Representation in relation  
to split Mother Internal Object**

Central Self representation attached to the idealized internal object (i.e., Ideal Mother, the Good Object)

Rejecting Self representation angrily attached to rejecting object

During the first years of life, children struggle to integrate

and depolarize the split mother object and self representation. Healthy personality reflected a more fully fused good and bad object and the corresponding self representation.

"Two adult personalities interact not only at the level of conscious choice, compatibility, and sexual attraction but also at the unconscious level, where they experienced an extraordinary fit of which they were unaware and which mirror infant splitting." Scharff and Scharff (2008)

### **Otto Kernberg and Margaret Mahler**

1928 -

1897 - 1985

[Object relationship issues is associated with a range of] clinical psychopathological phenomena, on what Anna Freud has called [very early] developmental disturbances.  
Mahler, 1975

### **Borderline Personalities**

1. A pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self image, and affect
2. Marked impulsivity
3. Frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment

“ . . . observations are interpreted with psychodynamic constructs including the “ . . . confluence of prevalent conflicts deriving from separation-individuation factors with those deriving from the following oedipal period” (Kernberg, 1980, p. 112)

### **Primitive Ego Defense Mechanisms (Mainly splitting)**

“ . . . protect the ego from conflicts by means of dissociating or actively keeping apart contradictory experiences of the self and of significant others” (Kernberg, 1980, p. 6).

Mahler uses “identity to refer to the earliest awareness of a sense of being. . . . **It is not a sense of *who* I am but *that* I am.**” Malher, 1975

### **Separation or Separateness**

**“The psychological birth of the human infant.”**

### **The Normal Autistic Phase**

0 to 3 Months

Self undifferentiated

## **Normal Symbiotic Phase**

3 to 4 Months

**Symbiosis**

## **Differentiation Phase**

(4 to 6 Months)

“Hatching from mother-infant symbiotic common orbit”

**Splitting** keeps positive and negative memories separate (i.e., not noticed or experienced at the same time). Others and one's self are experience alternately as all good and all bad.

## **Practicing Phase**

(5 to 16 Months)

## **Rapprochement Phase**

(15 to 22 Months and Beyond)

Toddler phase

**separation anxiety**

**Object Constancy**