Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association

(1978). Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 26:493-506

Instinct Theory, Object Relations, and Psychic-Structure Formation

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I CAN BEST PAY TRIBUTE to Margaret Mahler's outstanding contributions to psychoanalysis by presenting some facets of my own work in psychoanalytic theory and its conceptualization. I trust that in the course of my presentation, necessarily quite brief and condensed, it will become apparent how much I owe to her observations and concepts, although my conceptual language in a number of ways differs from hers. I know how much I have learned from her ways of perceiving psychological material with the eyes, ears, and other perceptual organs of a psychoanalyst, while I often organize such data in a somewhat different, but I believe congenial, manner. In part this is the case because my psychoanalytic experience is based exclusively on therapeutic work with adults, however regressed or infantile they may have been in aspects of their personalities. In part the differences, not in approach but in conceptualization, derive from my abiding special preoccupation with certain issues of psychoanalytic theory and concept formation, issues that have not been in the forefront of her work.

Paper presented at the Margaret Mahler Symposium on "Symbiosis and Separation—Individuation Theory and Instinct Theory," Philadelphia, Pa., May 21, 1977. The Symposium was organized by the Department of Psychiatry—Section of Child Psychiatry, Medical College of Pennsylvania, and The Children's Unit, Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute, and co-sponsored by the Philadelphia Psychoanalytic Institute and the Philadelphia Psychoanalytic Society.

I shall define, provisionally, individuation as that group of psychic processes or activities by which the separateness of subject and object as distinct psychic organizations becomes increasingly established. Since the formulation of the structural theory, the organization of the mind or personality has progressively been conceived of as a more or less orderly sequence, and synthesis, of differentiating-integrative processes by which id, ego, and superego become constituted as the three substructures of the individual psyche.

These processes begin with the differentiating activities taking place within the "dual unity" of the infant-mother psychic matrix, equivalent to Mahler's early symbiotic phase. In terms of the structural theory, individuation can be described as the total of the activities culminating in psychic-structure formation. Individuation or intrapsychic-structure formation is brought about, not by unilateral activities on the part of the infant organism, but by interactions taking place at first within the infant-mother unitary field, and progressively between elements that become more autonomous as differentiating activities within that field progress. The mother's various ministrations to the infant, although prompted by biological necessities and interactions of infant and mother, are organized on a far more advanced level of mentation than that of the infant's incipient mentation. They begin to organize his vital processes in such a way that one can more and more speak of the infant's *instinctual* life in contrast to a purely biological life with its physiological prerequisites. Following a formulation of Freud's—to which he himself and other analytic theorists have not consistently adhered—I define instinct (or instinctual drive) here as a *psychic representative* of biological stimuli or processes, and not as these biological stimuli themselves. In contradistinction to Freud's thought in "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" **(1915pp. 121-122)**, however, I do not speak of biological stimuli impinging on a ready-made "psychic apparatus" in which their psychic representatives are thus created,

but of interactional biological processes that find higher organization on levels which we have come to call psychic life. Understood as psychic phenomena or representatives, instincts come into being in the early organizing mother-infant interactions. They form the most primitive level of human mentation and motivation. In their totality, and as mental life progresses toward more complex organization of different levels of mentation and interplay between them, instincts constitute the id as distinguishable from ego and superego. Thus I conceive instincts (considered in the framework of psychoanalytic psychology), and the id as a psychic structure, as originating in interactions of the infantile organism and its human environment (mother), that is, in what Mahler calls the dual unity of the infant-mother symbiosis.

As for ego as a psychic substructure, and superego, they too, although on already more complexly organized levels of interaction, come into being as resultants of interactions of the individuating child and its human environment. Internalization of such interactions leads to their formation. Perhaps this was more readily acknowledged in respect to the superego, because Freud began his investigations into the process we now call internalization by studying the phenomena of identification as they came to light in the area of ideal-formation and superego development. But it is equally true of the ego as a coherent organization that it is formed in those primary identifications taking place during preoedipal stages.

Several implications of this view of things should be briefly indicated.

1. If individuation is defined as that group of processes by which increasing separateness of subject and object comes about, it means that, in and by these processes, both subject and object (in early stages, mother as object) become organized in the child's mental experience as more or less distinct entities. As I have expressed it elsewhere **(Loewald, 1962pp. 492-493)**, in regard to early differentiating activities internalization and externalization are processes

by which internality and externality first become constituted. I shall return to this point.

2. I do not agree with the view that memory, perception, reality testing, etc., are ego functions pure and simple that do not have their origin and their equivalents in instinctual life. In this sense I do not see that there are ego apparatuses with primary autonomy. Perception and memory in their primitive conformations, which remain basic ingredients of their later transformations—more familiar to us—are, I believe, unconscious instinctual activities, aspects of libidinal processes that only later gain a comparatively autonomous status. Expressed differently: in assuming an undifferentiated phase, instinctual in nature, from which id and ego differentiate, we assume undifferentiated libidinal-aggressive processes that bifurcate into what we can eventually distinguish as instinctual-affective life and cognitive functions. In such bifurcation the original global functioning, although dominated and overshadowed by specialized modes of functioning, remains preserved: libidinal-aggressive elements remain ingredients of perception and memory, considered as ego functions, and constitute the unconscious motivational aspect of the latter. On the other hand, cognitive aspects remain implicit in affective life, being from the beginning undifferentiated aspects of instinctual processes.

3. I think that the now commonly accepted definition of psychic structures as simply different groups of mental functions is not tenable. Take the ego as example: the ego is not defined as a structure by having functions such as memory, perception, reality testing, etc., but by its being a coherent organization on a certain level of mental functioning. It is its *mode of functioning*, which is due to its particular differentiation and integration of mental activities and "percepts," that makes us speak of it as a psychic structure distinct from the other structures. In general, the character of being a structure is not determined by the fact that certain components are simply grouped together,

whether these components are functions or material parts, but by the interrelations of the components as dominated by the organization of the whole, by the particular principles of arrangement and mutual relatedness of its component elements. We approach a psychoanalytic understanding of the structuredness or organization of a structure such as the ego or superego by understanding how it has come about, i.e., in terms of its genesis—granted that later factors may, and normally do, greatly modify and make more complex its organization and functioning. This is surely one of the reasons why we concern ourselves so much with early development. It is not only in order to understand children, but adults as well. I am not speaking in favor of reductionism. There is a vast difference between, on the one hand, deriving something from its origins and antecedents, thus reconstructing its structure and functioning, and, on the other hand, reducing some now extant structure to its original rudiments, as though no development had taken place. Without focusing on such reconstruction, we will never understand the unconscious organization and aspects of the human mind, or how where id was, ego may come into being.

It is quite likely that the notion of psychic structures being defined by their functions is due, at least in part, to confusion between the concepts of functioning, function, and process. We speak of a psychic structure as a functioning unit that can be said to be extant only inasmuch as it functions, unlike a material structure such as a building, which, if abandoned, has no function while remaining that material structure. It is one thing to say that psychic structures can be perceived or conceived as structures only insofar as they function, that they each are differently organized modalities of psychic activity or functioning. It is quite another thing to maintain that they each are clusters of specified mental functions.

Regarding process: it is true that we recognize

immediately, in contrast to material structures, the process-nature of psychic structures. Their structures consists in particularly organized activity-patterns, and not in arrangements of component elements that would have the nature of material particles of some kind. Apparently the definition of psychic structures as groups of *functions* has to do with our direct awareness of the process-character of psychic structures. However, while functions spell activity and process, function and process are concepts with different meanings. That functions manifest themselves in activities, have process-character, and that psychic structures are process-structures par excellence, does not mean that psychic structures are groups of mental functions. Different psychic structures are characterized by different ways of *functioning*; they perform mental functions in differently organized process-patterns and configurations, rather than different mental functions. Sphincter morality (Ferenczi), for example, shows how what we tend to single out as superego function operates (functions) on a primitive level of mentation, that is, on a level of mentation earlier than and different from superego organization and its particular mental process-structure.

If id, ego, and superego have their origins in interactions with environment that are internalized, interactions transposed to a new arena, thus becoming intrapsychic interactions, then psychic-structure formation and individuation are dependent on *object relations*. The separateness of subject and object—I am not speaking of the objective separateness of two biological organisms—becomes established by way of internalization and externalization processes in which both infant and mother participate, and, later, the child and its broadening human environment. Disturbances of internalizing and externalizing processes, caused by deficiencies—for whatever reasons—in the vicissitudes of attunement between child and human environment, spell disturbance of individuation, of psychic-structure formation. Mahler's clinical research work furnishes many examples of

such disturbances due to disharmonies between child and mother both in the early symbiotic phase and in the separation-individuation subphases of differentiation, practicing, rapprochement, etc.

Individuation, the organization of instincts, of id, ego, and superego, I have said, is dependent on object relations. The term object relations is by tradition used in a loose and rather imprecise way in psychoanalysis. It comprises the relations between child and adult—and the human environment, regardless of the level of psychic development on which these relations occur. Psychoanalytic theory makes the important distinctions between object choice and identification and between object cathexis and narcissistic cathexis. If we keep these distinctions in mind, and if we consider more closely the concepts ego (self, subject) and object, it becomes apparent that not all relations between child or adult and human environment are relations between a subject and an object. We have learned from psychoanalytic child observation and from the so-called narcissistic personality disorders that what for an observer is an object related to a subject, may be, for the infant or narcissistic patient, an aspect or part of himself or unspecified as to inside or outside, subject or object.

Let me give a brief clinical illustration. Some years ago I had a patient in his middle twenties in analysis who suffered from a narcissistic character disorder with depressive and hysterical features. We had established a fragile rapport consisting mainly in a volatile, easily disrupted empathic bond, with subtle indications of a powerfully demanding attitude on the patient's part, reminiscent of the nonverbal demanding quality of a small child's ties to his mother. Some of the patient's precarious object relations in current life had begun to come under our scrutiny. Over one weekend I had a slight accident which made it necessary to wear my left arm in a sling, but which did not interfere, as far as I was aware, with attending to my work and my patients; I was not in pain. On

the following Monday I saw all my patients. With the patient under discussion there immediately occurred a palpable disruption of our rapport. I briefly explained to him the reason for the sling. He was able to tell me, in vague language, that he experienced me as not being there and that he himself felt lifeless, without feelings or thoughts. Then he lapsed into silence. After some reflection I told the patient that I thought what he experienced must be like the experience of a small boy when his mother, of whom he is in need, is sick and appears unavailable; for him she then no longer exists, and together with this the boy then no longer feels alive, or dissolves. This interpretation led to gradual re-establishment of contact and of his functioning again.

In her book "On Human Symbiosis and the Vicissitudes of Individuation" Mahler writes **(1968**p. 220): "The danger situation in the symbiotic phase is loss of the symbiotic object, which amounts, at that stage, to loss of an integral part of the ego itself, and thus constitutes a threat of self-annihilation." Assuming the essential correctness of my interpretation, one may formulate the state of affairs, using Mahler's terms, as follows: the therapist, in this context a symbiotic object for the patient, is suddenly lost, having become a strange, unattached figure; and this coincides with, or is the same as, loss of self or annihilation. With the loss of the symbiotic object "an integral part of the ego itself" is lost. To put it in somewhat different terms, ego and object are not sufficiently differentiated, on the then dominant level of the patient's mentation, for him to experience a difference between ego and object. The patient seemed not to be bereft or anxious, but deadened. I should prefer to conceptualize this, not as a loss of symbiotic object and integral ego-part, but as a disintegration of nondifferentiated ego/object. As nondifferentiated, ego or self (I use these terms here interchangeably) and object are, so to speak, consubstantial. Disintegration of the meaningful organization of the object *is* disintegration of the ego and vice versa, insofar as they are

identical in experience. This unitary organization or structure **(the so-called self-object, Kohut 1971)**, in the developmental phase Mahler calls the symbiotic phase, is brought about and maintained by the conjoint organizing activities of mother and infant. The more this conjoint activity is dependent on the mother's contribution, that is, the more the infant is still at the mercy of his mother's organizing psychic activity for his own to be viable, the less is there differentiation of ego from object as different structures. If for some reason, as in the case of my patient, the object falls apart as a meaning-giving and meaningful agent, then the patient's ego disintegrates because the symbiotic object and the ego are not experienced as separate or separable. My interpretation, my organizing meaning-giving activity, presumably reactivated the patient's organizing potential so that we could reconstitute the self-object as a live psychic structure. Such an organization, undifferentiated as to id-ego and ego-object, could not be called an intrapsychic structure; internality and externality are disestablished as distinguishable worlds. On the higher level of superego formation we observe similar unitary structures where internal and external authority and constraints are not yet or no longer differentiated sufficiently to speak of superego as an internal structure. Such intermediate constraints, as we can see in children as well as in many adults, are not truly intrapsychic, but are experienced by the persons involved as taking shape and having force *between* them. They are neither internal nor external; and this is so despite the fact that an internal world, an intrapsychic id and ego of significant consolidation are established.

In psychoanalytic research on early child development and during therapeutic analysis, especially with patients suffering from narcissistic disorders, we are able to observe the organization and dedifferentiation of psychic structure and object relations as ongoing processes. We can see that object relations and intrapsychic structure formation and their

maintenance are intimately interrelated. And further, that there are psychic process-structures which are not intrapsychic but in an intermediate region as it were, analogous to Winnicott's transitional phenomena.

As mentioned before, in using the terms object relations, ego, object, as applied to interactional processes within the infant-mother matrix and to identificatory interactions at later stages, we speak from a standpoint that is incongruous with the level of mental organization we wish to understand and describe. The word object categorizes the human environment in terms of the adult's advanced and dominant "objective" level of mentation, a level different from that form of mentation we attempt to comprehend in psychoanalysis when we investigate archaic mental processes. It may be permissible to speak of object relations in reference to preobjective and identificatory interactions if we keep this incongruity in mind, if we remember that we deal here with phases of mental development in which subject and object are not, or not sufficiently, differentiated. Thus we are dealing with something other than two different organizations that could be said to be in a relationship to each other. Relationship, in contrast to sameness, identity, or "symbiotic fusion," implies difference, presupposes differentiation.

I provisionally defined individuation as that group of processes by which the separateness of subject and object becomes established. Obviously, this does not mean that prior to these processes ego and object were not separate but together like two entities in one container or two ideas in the same mind; or that they were so close together that we were not aware of their separateness. It means, instead, that in beginning stages there was, as far as the mentation of the infant is concerned—and it is that mentation we want to understand—only one global structure, one fleeting and very perishable mental entity that was neither ego nor object, neither a self nor another. My patient, at the time of the episode I described, because of the intensity of the transference, at least momentarily functioned on a comparable

level of mentation. For the archaic layers of the mind there is no separation-experience leading to differentiation, separateness, or "separation anxiety"; but, as Mahler expresses it, there is danger of annihilation, of disruption of functioning, when there is disruption of the symbiotic unity. On the other hand, during periods of physical separation of infant and mother if they are not unduly prolonged (if the infant is in a state of satisfaction), the global organization, which is neither ego nor object, is preserved. I venture to suggest that the "good enough" mother, during certain periods or moments in early motherhood, functions on a similar level of mentation. I believe that Winnicott's understanding of early development, in which he includes the mother's archaic experience-level—activated by pregnancy and early motherhood—as an integral component, is in essential agreement with such a view. We also begin to realize that the therapist, in order to work analytically with patients with narcissistic disorders, must rely on his ability to reactivate such archaic levels of mental functioning within himself, at given moments during treatment. In other words, he needs the flexibility or mental agility to suspend, when required, his ego boundaries for a long enough period, if he is to understand the patient's experience and then interpret it to him. His interpretation, if adequately attuned, raises the experience to a higher level of mental organization, a level where we can more properly speak of object relations.

If we use the term object relations for any and all psychic interactions of objectively distinguishable human beings, regardless of whether or not instincts and ego are differentiated from object, then the primary datum for a genetic, psychoanalytic psychology would be object relations. This relatedness is the psychic matrix out of which intrapsychic instincts and ego, and extrapsychic object, differentiate.

I shall conclude my remarks with some comments on the "widening scope of psychoanalysis." The scope of psychoanalytic investigation and treatment was, during the earlier

phase of their development, determined by those aspects of the mental life of patients that could in essence be derived from the oedipal stage at which ego and (libidinal) object are sufficiently differentiated. Already with the tracing of libido development in terms of oral, anal, phallic, and genital stages the picture began to change. But it was the investigation of psychosis, of the archaic mentality of young children, of "savages," and of group psychology (where individuation regresses) that initiated an understanding of instinctual-cognitive processes on different levels of mentation. The comprehensive title for such investigations became: analysis of the ego, i.e., of the graded levels of more or less coherent organization. Ego, at that point, was the title for the totality of these levels *considered as a comprehensive organization*. Freud at times spoke, in reference to this ego, as the *Gesamt-Ich*, "the ego as a whole" **(1921p. 130)**, when he wanted to distinguish it from the ego considered as counterpart to id and superego. Organization here means organizing activity as much as the totality resulting from such activity.

Analysis of the ego in this sense means: to investigate how such an encompassing and increasingly coherent organization comes into being; what are its antecedents and ingredients? What are the processes that bring about and determine this organization? It became apparent (1) that a coherent organization of some solidity was already present by the time the object relations forming the Oedipus complex and, with that, the starting point for neurotic conflict could be discerned. (2) What became known as ego defects or deficiencies and may lead to borderline and psychotic phenomena could not be understood *on the basis* of the oedipal conflict. They antedate and are apt to distort *the very development* of the oedipal stage and its object relations. The organizing activities leading up to the oedipal stage, themselves, and their disturbances, became the subject of analytic investigation and, if feasible, of therapeutic repetition and reconstruction in the transference.

One can speak, following Kohut **(1971)**, of narcissistic *transference*—or self-object transference **(Kohut, 1977)**—insofar as there is a relatedness, a rapport between patient and analyst which is mainly based on an archaic form of relatedness, close to or reproducing "symbiosis," and which is repeated in or transferred to the analytic situation. There is transfer of the archaic relatedness, with its blurring or lack of ego boundaries, from the preoedipal prototypes to given current figures and specifically to the analyst. By virtue of the undifferentiated nature of this transference such patients have difficulty not only in distinguishing between themselves and the analyst but also between infantile and current figures, between infantile or archaic and current, more advanced levels of relatedness: not only the differentiation of internal and external, but also that of past and present is deficient. For patients with predominantly oedipal unresolved conflicts, ego and object as well as temporal modes are sufficiently distinguishable.

I fail to see that the attempts at therapeutic reconstruction and interpretation of these far more archaic phases and levels of mental life, when working with more deeply disturbed patients, is any less psychoanalytic than work with the classical neuroses. It only seems that way because levels of relatedness, involving both patient and analyst, come into play that are far less familiar to most of us than oedipal and postoedipal levels. And furthermore, verbal interpretation itself, the mainstay of psychoanalytic intervention, takes on connotations and aspects of meaningfulness—of which we as analysts need to be aware—that derive from or hark back more directly to that "magical" power and significance of words which plays a predominant role in the preverbal and early verbal period of life and the resonance and responses of the young child to parental verbal material.[1]

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[1] Some of the preceding formulations grew out of recent personal communications between Calvin Settlage and myself.

No one who has tried such work can doubt that a great deal about early and archaic mentation can be learned from it. Only further work with patients can help us answer the question of its therapeutic value in terms of lasting change. Temporary changes undoubtedly occur with adult patients of the type under discussion. But it is not clear to me whether, given the early onset of the disturbances, and in view of the primitive nature of their object relations, sufficient true internal structure formation is likely, or whether such patients periodically will require equivalents of that "refueling" Mahler et al. **(1975)**, following Furer, describe in the practicing subphase of individuation.

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