

Introduction to Kleinian Theory

Sue N. Carlson, LMHC (2015)

Note to Students:

Delving into Kleinian theory is not for the feint of heart. For some, the concepts seem outrageous and disturbing. If you find yourself reacting in this way, don't worry; you are in good company. At the same time, interest in and incorporation of many of Klein's ideas have grown in the many branches of today's psychoanalysis. What I suggest to students new to this theory is to try to hold-off on judging the ideas until you have a basic understanding of them. This is not an easy task, but it is a useful exercise for both theoretical learning and clinical work. I also remind my students that this is a scientific theory not a "cannon of truth." Theory is intended to inform understanding and to organize experience; it is not to be held as truth used to convert and persuade others especially not our patients.

Unlike Freud, who was a gifted writer and trained scholar, Klein was, by all accounts, a brilliant, creative, albeit unsystematic thinker. Due to life circumstances, she never went to college, and struggled with severe depression throughout most of her life. Her theory was forged through a divisive controversy with Anna Freud. Who would be the heir to Freud's psychoanalytic movement? Who "really" understood the unconscious and, thus, how to sustain the psychoanalytic technique, even with very small children? Klein believed that she, more than Anna Freud, truly grasped Freud's vision of working in the transference with unconscious process.

**** Review: Slides – Melanie Klein Biography**

Klein's confidence (some would say arrogance) and defiance allowed her to formulate original ways of thinking about and understanding primitive states of mind--both developmental and pathological. One example of her contribution to psychoanalysis in general is her concept of projective identification. Projective identification has been widely accepted (while often misunderstood) as an essential concept to the understanding of non-verbal communication between two people. This concept allows the clinician to work in the "music and dance" of the session rendering "talk therapy" a much more nuanced and profound relational experience.

As you begin to study this theory, it may be helpful to keep in mind that the concepts of Klein's theory are like interlocking pieces of a puzzle. It is necessary to examine and describe each concept in its own right. If possible, keep in mind that Kleinian theory is not linear, but rather a phenomenological, multi-dimensional model of the human psyche.

Some of Klein's most influential ideas are as follows:

Infants are not only dependent on their human caretakers for their physical survival, but also for the development of a sense of self, of a mind capable of consciously experiencing

emotional experience – both their own and that of another. Adult mental health and dysfunction directly relates to the parental attention given and received in the formative years. (Point of interest: John Bowlby, founder of Attachment Theory, was a supervisee of Melanie Klein.)

**** Review: Slides – Melanie Klein Positions**

Klein viewed young children's play as essential to developing the capacity to regulate instinctual (unconscious) impulses. Klein also perceived play as essential to learning and developing the mind. She considered children's play to be the equivalent of free association in adults.

Klein viewed all behaviors, attitudes, moods, etc. as manifestations of unconscious phantasy life.

**** Review: Slides – Melanie Klein Unconscious Phantasy**

Major Criticisms of Klein's ideas:

Many view Klein's theory as too speculative and unrealistic with regard to the degree of mental sophistication that she attributed to infants.

Klein's overall vision of human experience is taken by many to be disproportionately negative and pessimistic. Sigmund (not Anna) Freud's theory has also been criticized for this.

Klein's developmental model does not address the role of language or learning. She was, however, very concerned about young children whose curiosity and capacity to learn were inhibited.

Her model of development is exclusively concerned with infant and early childhood. It does not address adolescence, adulthood or old age as unique phases of life with specific developmental tasks, benefits and challenges.

Until recently, Kleinian theorists did not address the phenomenon of trauma as related to *both* external and internal events. Trauma, if discussed at all, was viewed as an individual's perceptions and interpretation of events based on phantasy. I believe this perspective was based on a misunderstanding by Klein of Freud's abandonment of his seduction theory and development of his ideas on infantile sexuality, and her focus on intrapsychic life.

Finally, Kleinian theory seems to engender an emotional reaction of either fervent acceptance or vehement rejection. This intensity of reaction may be due more to her personality and ways in which she (and her followers) put forth ideas: concretely, as truth, rather than hypothetically, than to the actual concepts.

Recommended Readings:

(** is placed next to primary texts that should be read.)

Eissler, K. R. (1993). Comments on Erroneous Interpretations of Freud's Seduction Theory. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, Vol. 41, 2.

This is an interesting article for those wanting to delve further into understanding the evolution of the Seduction Theory.

**Joseph, B. (1988). Projective Identification: Clinical Aspects. E. Spillius (ed.) *Melanie Klein Today: Developments in Theory and Practice*, (Vol. 1. pp. 138-152). New York: Routledge.

Betty Joseph gives a clear clinical description of projective identification as seen in three patients.

**Klein, M., & Riviere, J. (1964). *Love, Hate & Reparation*. New York: Norton Library.

This book is comprised of two lectures given to the public. It is an accessible introduction to the underlying ideas.

**Likierman, M. (2001). *Melanie Klein: Her Work in Context*. London: Cromwell Press.

This is a comprehensive and clearly written account of Klein's major concepts. As the title suggests, the author gives biographic as well as historical information to help the reader understand the development of Klein's thinking. The bibliography following each chapter could be used as a guide to locate many of the original papers pertinent to the theoretical idea(s) under discussion.

Wadell, M. (1998). *Inside Lives: Psychoanalysis and the Growth of the Personality (The Tavistock Clinical Series)*. London: Karnac.

This book is excellent in its clarity of ideas and use of clinical examples. This author is post-Kleinian and does address development over the entire lifespan – a unique offering.

Recommended Films:

Documentary: "Babies," directed by Thomas Balmes.

This documentary follows four babies from different countries through their first year of life. Theory can be quite abstract! Viewing babies directly is a good way to make sense of some of the ideas.

"Where The Wild Things Are," directed by Spike Jonze, adapted from the book by Maurice Sendak.

This is an excellent movie. It does a great job at illustrating emotional experience as seen through the internal world of a young boy. It also provides a good example of unconscious phantasy/dream life.

Learning Objectives:

1. Klein considered the life and death instincts to be the primary “forces” of the origin of the mind, i.e., the body ego (impulses prior to language/symbolic development).
 - a. How do you understand the relationship between the life and death instinct and the good and bad breast?
 - b. How do the instincts relate to anxiety?
 - c. What is the primary defense against persecutory anxiety? What is the primary defense against depressive anxiety? Can you describe the positions?
2. The instincts are believed to be related to unconscious phantasy. Describe your understanding of this concept.
3. The mechanisms of defense are splitting, projection and introjection. These mechanisms are also viewed as essential to forming and developing internal object relations. If possible, describe your understanding of this idea.
4. What was Klein’s view of projective identification and how was it different from how it is thought of today?
5. Kleinian theory can be difficult to grasp. It can also stir strong feelings in the reader or beginning student of the theory.
 - a. What is your reaction to these introductory ideas?
 - b. What do you make of your reaction?

Bio.

Sue N. Carlson received her certificate in psychoanalysis from Northwestern Psychoanalytic Society and Institute in 2005. She is a psychoanalytically-informed psychotherapist and supervisor in private practice, working with adults and couples. Sue has over 15 years of experience teaching British Object Relations and related topics for Antioch University Seattle, NPSI, COR, SPSI, and the Alliance. She is a member of COR and the Alliance.

Contact Information

<http://www.sueneellcarlson-psychotherapy.com/>