

# A psychoanalytic model of the child-in-the-family-in-the-community<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Donald Meltzer and Martha Harris (1976)

### Theoretical background

Models are not theories but are organisations of theories for use. The model that will be described derives its theoretical background from the work of, mainly, Freud, Karl Abraham, Melanie Klein, Wilfred Bion, Roger Money-Kyrle and Donald Meltzer. It is intended to be used as a framework of reference for the construction of social-psychological research into the educational function of the family in our culture and for the interpretation of the findings of this research.

### Concept of metapsychology as six-dimensional

For our purpose it is necessary to employ a multi-dimensional model to fit an extended concept of metapsychology. It needs to embrace the six dimensions from which mental life may be considered: namely the structural, dynamic, economic, genetic, geographic and epistemologic. The model should be able to encompass these six dimensions from the point of view of the individual, of the family and of the community. It should also, by defining the forces that mediate flux within and between these three spheres provide a means of systematic description (not explanation), of the movements of growth or regression.

For the purpose of exposition, and perhaps later of use, a graphic representation of the total situation is to be employed which undertakes this six-dimensional task. Its components will be separately described and their interactions subsequently traced. In the course of doing so we will attempt a brief description of the background theories, the first requirement being an elucidation of the six-dimensions themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from the report commissioned in 1996 by the Organisation of Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) of the United Nations. First published in English in *Sincerity: Collected Papers of Donald Meltzer*, ed. A. Hahn (Karnac, 1994). Separate publication forthcoming (2012).

## Role of mental pain

The central phenomenon in all psycho-analytical conceptions is that of mental pain, which may generally be divided into three categories, persecutory, confusional and depressive. The first refers to pains involving threat to the self, the second implies threat to the capacity to think and function and the third indicates threat to love objects.

Study of mental pain requires not only definition of its quality and reference, but also of its distribution and source. Because mental pain can be distributed in both the external world and the internal world, it is necessary in the clinical situation to ask “whose pain is this?” Pains may be passed serially within any social grouping and modifications of quality and intensity, consequent to this serial passage must be clarified.

### The structural dimension: the self

Mental pains, generally called **anxiety** (persecutory, confusional or depressive) are dealt with, at least from birth onwards, through relations with objects, initially with the mothering person experienced first at a part-object level as a breast, or its representation, a presence that feeds, comforts, nurtures or frustrates. The consequence of these interactions is that mental pain becomes bound in the grown up structure of the personality. This structure, the **self**, is at first far from unified in its functions or its body reference or image, but gradually organizes around an internalised object which has the meaning experienced in the nurturing situation. It therefore tends to be experienced in phantasy as breast-and-nipple (**partial object**) and later as mother-and-father, the **combined object**.

These internal objects are idealised insofar as the pain-provoking aspects of them, particularly the frustrating, disappearing, keeping-waiting aspects tend to be held in a split-off position, as if they were quite distinct from the gratifying ones. This has the effect of inducing a certain degree of splitting in the self into idealised and bad, (or destructive), parts, the latter reacting with violence and envy to frustration.

Since the functional aspects of the personality, the self, has both instinctual endowments (Id) and developmental capacities (Ego), the splits that occur during development distribute the instinctual endowment unevenly, so that often very valuable inclinations (talents?) rest under the domina-

tion of the destructive part of the personality and are not available for constructive use and development within the sphere of the good objects and sentiments of love and gratitude.

This is noticeably so with intellectual capacities, verbal gifts and sexual vitality. Where the later is marked, a severe impoverishment of sexuality in the sphere of loving relations may develop which favours the organisation of perverse sexuality, anti-social attitudes, addictive tendencies and mental illness.

It is possible that along with the structuralizing of the personality as just outlined, a parallel development takes place which evolves an alternate “world” on the basis of negativism and envy, the delusional system of the schizophrenic part of the personality. Its prominence in the whole structure, its access to consciousness and its indirect influences on development varies, of course, from individual to individual and from time to time (being most pressing at times of great stress and flux, such as adolescence) but will be assumed for the purpose of this model to be ubiquitous.

The dynamic dimension: mechanisms for dealing with pain.

These processes of development which *bind* mental pain in the form of structure are further amplified by mental mechanisms aimed variously at modulating, modifying or evading mental pain.

The *modulation* is accomplished primarily by thought leading to understanding and actions which may successfully modify or adapt to the external world or internalise new qualities into the internal objects which comfort or strengthen the personality. *Modification* of anxieties is achieved through **omnipotent phantasy** of various sorts called the **mechanism of defence**, but many of these same defences may be employed in a more violent way to evade mental pain through its distribution either in the internal world or in the external. These three processes, taken together, constitute the dynamic dimension of personality functioning.

While the omnipotent phantasies are limitless, they are usually described or categorised for convenience under such headings as introjection, projective identification, obsessional mechanisms, manic mechanisms, confusional mechanisms and acting out, any one of which may have the effect of instituting repression or loss of insight.

## The economic dimension

The overall consequence of the operation of these means of dealing with mental pain constitutes the dimension of the economics of the mind and may be considered to follow one or other of three principles. The most primitive of these is a **compulsion to repeat** previous patterns of behaviour, unmodified by the experience of its consequences. The second, more evolved, is a **pleasure principle** to minimise mental pain and it is subject to modification by experience of the consequences in the outside world. The third principle relates not so much to behaviour and its results but to the meaning of relationships and is called the **paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions** (slightly modified by Bion and abbreviated Ps<->D).

These are value systems and respectively emphasize the safety and comfort of the self versus the welfare of the love object (especially, in the depressive position, the internal object).

## The genetic dimension

Freud's fourth dimension of personality is the **genetic** one, which views the personality as the resultant of summation of its life experience, where these experiences have left their mark either as structural modifications, altered dynamic tendencies, shifts in economic principles or memories. But two addenda to Freud's meta-psychology must be entertained in order to make our model capable of fulfilling the functions for which it is intended.

## The geographic dimension

A fifth dimension must take into account the **geography of phantasy** and its consequent view-of-the-world. The life-space of the individual is experienced to be taking place in at least four different spaces delimited by the body boundary: namely, an internal world containing infantile parts of the self and internal objects, an outside world which the self inhabits and where it encounters external objects, and further, the internal space (or world) of internal objects and, finally of external objects. Added to this list one must suspect the existence in phantasy of the 'nowhere' of the delusional system.

## The epistemological dimension

The sixth, and for the purpose of this model in research on educational functions the most important, is the **epistemological** dimension. It is a dimension of metapsychology inherent in the later work of Wilfred Bion and the amplified model of the mind which he has superimposed on Freud's model as implicitly modified by Melanie Klein. It enables us to distinguish various categories of learning, to define the mental state underlying them, and to trace their consequences for personality development. Because they are so crucial to our later exposition, we will describe them at some length. They may be named learning from experience, from projective identification, from adhesive identification, from scavenging, from delusion. All contrast with 'learning about'.

**Learning from experience**, as described by Bion (Heinemann, 1965) involves participation in an emotional experience in such a way that a modification of the personality takes place. The person 'becomes' something that he was not before, say a 'walker' in the case of a small child, or a 'doctor' in the case of an adult. Internal qualification of this sort may be contrasted with the varieties of external qualification bestowed by social structures.

In contrast, **learning by projective identification** involves an omnipotent phantasy of entry into, and taking over, the mental qualities and capabilities of another person. Because the conception of the other person is limited and since the projection imbues him with qualities of the subject, the result is something of a caricature. Where the projective identification is with an internal object, qualities of omniscience and judgmental attitudes predominate.

On the other hand, in **learning by adhesive identification**, which involves a deeply unconscious phantasy of sticking on to the surface of the object, the resulting identification picks out only the social appearance and thus takes on the attributes of a somewhat mindless imitation of appearance and behaviour. It is characterised by instability, tending to collapse easily under stress and to be fickle, easily shifting to new objects of immediate interest or attachment.

**Learning by scavenging** typifies the envious part of the personality which cannot ask for help nor accept it with gratitude. It tends to view all skill and knowledge as essentially secret and magical in its control of nature and people. It watches and listens for items 'thrown away', as it were, where no 'please' or 'thank you' need enter in, and therefore tends to feel triumphant over the stupidity of others for giving away the formula.

**Delusional learning** is of an entirely different order, believing that whatever is revealed in nature or by man is essentially worthless and that only the hidden and therefore occult is of value. It sees evidence in the nuances while neglecting the apparent and constructs a world that is essentially anti-nature.

All five of these forms of learning are essentially autonomous in their inception and express either the thirst for knowledge and understanding, or its converse, intrusive curiosity. By contrast, **learning about the world** has its source in the motives of the teacher. Its methods are essentially those of animal training, stick-and-carrot, dependant for their success on co-opting greed, timidity, docility or competitiveness of the subject. Its achievements effect no deep modification of the person but rather decorate his social persona for purposes of adaptation to the demands of the environment, and have little connection with ultimate goals or ethical principles.

Of these six forms of learning only the first, learning from experience, requires a shift in values in keeping with the move from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position. It is heavily dependent on the assistance and guidance of benevolent objects (either internal or external) with whom it can share the burden of the anxiety (confusional or persecutory) that attends the impact of a new idea. The advent of the depressive feeling resulting from the changed view of self and world inherent in such learning is accompanied by feelings of gratitude and privileged indebtedness to the mentor.