

Object Relations Theory

Key Concepts

Object relations theory is a modern adaptation of psychoanalytic theory that places less emphasis on the drives of aggression and sexuality as motivational forces and more emphasis on human relationships as the primary motivational force in life.

- Humans are relationship seeking rather than pleasure seeking as Freud suggested.
- Relationships are the main focus of psychotherapy, especially the relationship with the therapist.

Freud originally used the term "object" to mean anything an infant directs drives toward for satiation and defines two types of drives: libidinal and aggressive. Accordingly, objects became a key component of Freud's drive/structural model of the human psyche. Since Freud, however, many theorists such as Klein, Fairbairn, Winnicott, Jacobson, Kernberg and Kohut have moved, in varying degrees, toward a relational/structural model of the psyche.

- In the object relations model an "object" is the target of relational needs in human development. Humans have an innate drive to form and maintain relationships. This fundamental human need forms a context against which other drives such as libidinal and aggressive drives gain meaning.

Objects can be people (mother, father, others) or things, such as transitional objects with which we form attachments. These objects and the developing child's relationship with them are incorporated into a self, and become the building blocks of the self-system.

In childhood, we form relationships with our stuffed animals, toys and pets (transitional objects). Later in life, some people form intense and even self-destructive relationships with food and alcohol, as well as with other people. So the term object is more inclusive for our understanding of how humans form and preserve a sense of self, as well as relationships with others.

We come into the world with a genetic encoding that sets the stage for whom we will become. However, it is also our interactions with significant others, from birth onward, that shapes how our genetic predispositions will be expressed. Early in life, we have little sense of ourselves, or our identity. It is through our relationships with the significant people around us that we take in parts of others (objects) and slowly build a self-structure, which we eventually call a personality.

Similar the Freudian theory, object relation theory emphasizes the importance of early childhood experiences. The blueprint of a self-structure is formed early in life out of our relationships with the objects (significant others, and parts of significant others) around us. Once formed, this blueprint can be modified, but our basic tendency is to seek out others (friends, spouses) who will reaffirm these early self-object relationships. It is as if in early childhood we create a script for a drama and then spent the rest of our lives seeking out others to play the parts. This does not mean the script cannot be changed. However, the more traumatic our early self-object relations, the more rigid and resistant to change we become.

Psychological dysfunction is viewed as an expression of being stuck at a stage of development, unable to mature further. From the object-relations perspective, dysfunctional and symptomatic behaviors are an immature attempt to resolve early traumas. However, these attempts typically fail since we use immature manipulations to get others, who are engaged in similar manipulations, to meet our unmet needs stemming out of these early traumas. Resolution requires a special relationship with a trained professional. Psychotherapy is the process that allows a resolution of the trauma through the relationship with the therapist. Only then, can the person move forward toward a more mature, individuated life.

In summary, the term "object-relations" refers to the self-structure we internalize in early childhood, which functions as a blueprint for establishing and maintaining future relationships. Psychopathology is an expression of traumatic self-object internalizations from childhood acted out in our current relationships. Psychotherapy is the resolution of these self-destructive patterns of relating so we can mature and self-actualize.

Adapted from Thomas Klee Ph.D. <http://www.objectrelations.org/orkey.htm>