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On the Dynamics of Social Structure

A Contribution to the Psychoanalytical Study of
Social Phenomena Deriving from the Views of
Melanie Klein*

Many observers have noted that there is a strikingly close correspondence between certain group phenomena and those processes in the individual that represent what Melanie Klein has called the psychotic level of human development. Schimberg (1931), for instance, has pointed to the psychotic-like content of primitive rites and ceremonies; and Bion (1955) has suggested that the emotional life of the group is only understandable in terms of processes at this very primitive level. My own recent experience (Jaques, 1951) has impressed upon me how much institutions are used by their individual members to reinforce mechanisms of defense against anxiety, and in particular against recurrence of the early paranoid and depressive anxieties first described by Melanie Klein (1932; 1948a; 1952a). It is as though the members of groups unconsciously place part of the contents of their deep inner lives outside themselves and pool these parts in the emotional life of the group. May not sufficiently deep analysis of the individual take us into the group?

Answers to these last questions may be forthcoming in the light of recent advances in the understanding of psychotic processes as a normal part of personality development. It is the purpose of this paper to examine to what extent these developments in psychoanalysis provide a bridge linking individual and group behavior: and to what extent an understanding of them in the individual contributes to the comprehension of the dynamics of group behavior. In connecting social behavior with mechanisms pertaining to this very deep stratum, I in no way wish to suggest that social relationships are totally determined by unconscious factors, or indeed that they are purely defensive in character. I do propose, however, to limit my present considerations to these particular connections. The specific hypothesis I shall consider is that one of the primary cohesive elements binding individuals into institutionalized human

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association is that of defense against anxiety emanating from the psychotic developmental level (and conversely, although I shall not deal with the hypothesis here, that psychotic-like desocialization occurs in those who have not developed the ability to use the mechanism of association in social groups to avoid psychotic anxiety).

Social institutions, as I shall here use the term, are either social structures or cultural mechanisms. Social structures are systems of roles, or positions, which may be taken up and occupied by persons. Cultural mechanisms are conventions, customs, taboos which are used in regulating the relations among members of a society. For purposes of analysis institutions can be defined independently of the particular individuals who occupy roles within them. But in real life the workings of institutions take place through real people using cultural mechanisms within a social structure; and the unconscious or implicit functions of an institution are specifically determined by the particular individuals who are associated as members of the institution, occupying roles within it and operating the culture. Changes may occur in the unconscious functions of an institution through change in personnel, without there necessarily being any apparent change in manifest structure or functions. And conversely, as is so often noted, the imposition of a change in manifest structure or culture to resolve a problem may often leave the problem unsolved because the unconscious relationships remain unchanged.

Some Recent Developments in Psychoanalysis

The extensions to psychoanalytical theory made by Melanie Klein concern the early infantile or pre-oedipal phases of development. She has described two early developmental phases which correspond to two predominant types of anxiety—paranoid and depressive. The period when paranoid anxiety predominates normally extends over the first three to four months of development. Depressive anxiety normally predominates for the subsequent months to the end of the first year. The terms paranoid-schizoid (or simply, paranoid) position and depressive position are used to connote the predominance of the particular pattern of impulses, anxieties and defenses which characterizes each of these phases in development.

The infant projects its libidinal and aggressive, or good and bad, impulses onto external objects. The earliest of such objects are the mother's breasts, and these are experienced as good or bad depending on whether good or bad impulses are projected into them. The good and bad breasts are introjected and constitute the primitive good and bad internal objects which lay the foundation of the ego and super-ego. The strength of the libidinal and aggressive impulses will determine the degree of goodness and badness of the internalized objects;

and will determine the degree to which the infant will be disturbed by phantasies of persecution by bad objects, that is to say, disturbed by paranoid anxiety.

The conception of phantasy requires separate comment. It is here used in the sense, elaborated by Susan Isaacs (1948), of completely *unconscious* autistic activity. The early infantile processes being described have, however, a physical or object-like content rather than an autistic mental content. To the infant, projection and introjection are physical acts—acts of regurgitating and excreting, of eating and incorporating. And the objects which are incorporated are unconsciously real inside, in the sense of constituting an inner world, or an internal society, the functioning of which has real effects on conscious perceptions and behavior. Thus, phantasy persecution, for example, refers to intrapsychic activity in which the infant feels under actual attack by its internal objects and through unconscious projection of the inner situation may perceive and behave towards persons in the outside world as though they are hostile and threatening.

In the paranoid position, the characteristic defense against anxiety is that of splitting all internal objects into good and bad, the idealization of the good and the projection of the bad. The more intense the aggressive impulses, the more intense are the phantasies of persecution; and correspondingly, the more profound and complete the splitting, the more intense the idealization, and the greater the projection. Given a balance between libidinal and aggressive impulses, and given loving parental support, the internal world is felt as sufficiently replete with good objects to ward off persecution by the bad, and paranoid anxiety is kept within tolerable limits.

After the first three or four months of life, aggressive impulses and persecutory anxiety diminish if external parental support is sufficiently consistent. Concurrently, the infant begins to recognize mother, father and others as real persons; relationships undergo a fundamental change. He or she now sees whole objects, compact of both good and bad, instead of dealing with parts—for example breasts—split into either wholly good or wholly bad objects. The perception of both good and bad in a whole object, however, creates a new type of anxiety: that of losing the good loved objects by virtue of sadistic attacks on its bad aspect. To the extent that greed and sadistic impulses are strong and uncontrolled, the infant's loved objects are destroyed and torn into pieces. This destruction goes on in both the external and the internal world. In consequence the infant suffers persecution at the hands of the internally attacked object, and depression as a result of pining for the lost good object, also guilt for the attack upon it. The depressive anxieties, comprising persecution and guilt, may be dealt with by mourning, in which the underlying feelings of loss, guilt and love are experienced and tolerated because of successful restoration and reparation of the lost bad object. Successful mourning of this kind depends upon the