Relating object relations theory to child protection social work

By using Klein’s work on defence mechanisms (splitting, blame and idealization), the aim of this workshop is to explore how unwanted feelings can have a negative effect on unconscious behaviors. One of the most powerful contributions of this perspective is that it can show us how people, together with their habitual affective practice, construct certain realities which then shape their world (Wetherell, 2012).

In this workshop I will begin by introducing relevant concepts from Melanie Klein’s work (1946; 1952) and conclude by discussing how defence mechanisms can lead to affective practice in social work organizations so that practitioners gain a better understanding of how this can affect the area of child protection work.

Kleinian psychoanalysis: Object relations theory

Psychoanalytic theories acknowledge that individuals are predisposed to self-deception because of an innate ‘desire to repress undesirable feelings and/ or realities’ (Fotaki and Hyde, 2014: 4). In particular, Melanie Klein’s work around object relations theory, and projection identification, provides us with effective methods to explore the deceptive, unconscious behaviors which occur when individuals interact with one another in a social work setting.

Object relations theory presents strong arguments for a conception of an ‘inner world’ which acknowledges the necessity of ‘conflicting fantasies’ born out of the anxieties inherent in the intense intimacies of early dependency and love (Evans, 2000: 122). Furthermore, this perspective suggests that early childhood anxieties lead to self-deception processes which involve projecting unwanted aspects of the self onto other objects/people/groups (Klein, 1952). The view is that the inner world has its own complex space and that individuals unconsciously use aspects of the external world to represent aspects of their own internal world. These internal objects are in fact representations of others that are not identical with the qualities of real others but are allowed a relative autonomy; ‘they can be destructive, or creative-destructive, when splitting and projection overwhelm the capacity to distinguish between the different realities of the internal and external worlds’ (Evans, 2000:122).

Splitting

The term ‘splitting’ was used by Klein to describe the central component of the defence mechanism she called the ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position (Klein, 1946). Splitting occurs when people struggle to cope with a bad experience which creates anxiety. It is a process which enables them to split off from the bad feeling or object and project it onto some outside object, in an attempt to prevent it contaminating the good feelings or objects. Once the projection has taken place then the individual is relieved of the intense and painful experience.

For example, in the case of the Rotherham Inquiry, social workers felt unable to report concerns because they were situated in an agency which had become so focused on managerialism it had “drained the human meaning out of process” (Heffernan, 2014). Rather than developing a safe place to work so that social workers could have “sensitive conversations”, the managerial hierarchy had instead created “a culture of fear and rivalry”; one which had made it difficult for anyone to challenge the decisions made by “the most senior of people”. So while social workers felt they were being ignored, managers felt that social workers could tell them anything. These two disparate and opposing views held by managers and social workers both appeared to be genuinely believed. Managers felt that social workers were being over cautious and social workers came to be seen as the problem. According to Kleinian perspective managers needed to protect themselves against the real or perceived threat from the bad objects identified as here as the social workers, and achieved this by unconsciously restricting the means through which social workers could communicate with them. This led to unproductive communication and the failure led to ‘up to 1400 children’ being ‘subjected to appalling sexual exploitation’ (BBC news, 26 August 2014). Senior council staff were found culpable of blatant, collective failures as a result of underplaying the problem (Jay, 2014). As a
result, the atmospheric ambience of unease at Rotherham led to social workers becoming affected by the organizational culture. So many were suffering from exhaustion, no one had “the energy to speak up” (BBC Radio4, 3 Nov 2014). Although defence mechanisms assist survival, they also create difficulties because they do not resolve the original source of anxiety and it becomes increasingly difficult to challenge as any resolution involves the reintegration of unpleasant elements (Fotaki and Hyde, 2014).

Blame

While splitting allows for the generation of blind spots, blame allows the split to be sustained and often follows or accompanies splitting. As a result of splitting, certain parts of the organization may appear to be made up of difficult members; they are then regarded as having always been difficult and are therefore held responsible for their own problems as the case of the Rotherham Inquiry. In psychodynamic theory, blame involves projecting unwanted parts of the undesirable situation onto other people or things because an external conflict is preferable to the consequences of having to engage in self-examination. The act of blaming is indispensable for rationalizing failure away by identifying a suitable culprit: either an individual or group of individuals or even a menacing bad policy or strategy that threatens the organization from the outside. While externalization of bad feelings offers a superficial and short lived comfort, it also renders the organization blind to those who might help overcome problems. Blame is generally seen as problematic in organizations: it can be mistakenly and unconsciously attributed to those who identify organizational problems. As Klein (1952) describes, such ‘part objects’ generate bad feelings and pose a threat to the ideal state, and, as such, they must be defended against. The escalation of blame is then required to maintain its ‘protective’ role in enabling flight from organizational reality and to sustain idealization at an individual, organizational and/or systemic level as follows.

Idealization

Holding ideals is not in itself problematic in offering vision they provide impetus and motivation for action. However, problems arise when an idealized (individual or organizational) state is thought to have been achieved because critical reflection and questioning then become impossible. Brown and Starkey (2000: 106) argue that idealization may be necessary for maintaining a sense of organizational identity; but it is nonetheless dysfunctional because it militates against rational and realistic organizational decision making. Criticism is then believed to arise from the malicious intent of others and needs defending against. Such idealization is only superficially comforting as it maintains contact with good, albeit unrealistic, feelings while bad feelings are externalized. Certain organizations and their members are especially susceptible to idealization. In these instances, idealization shifts to the systemic level as the purposes that institutions embody become the object of emotional investment. The ideal that needed to be maintained in the case of Rotherham was that the agency was functioning well and was following policy and procedures accordingly while, in reality, the agency was having to adjust to huge spending cuts and was fearful of accommodating more children. Large public institutions tend towards idealism because they perform particular social functions by allowing citizens to project onto them their aspirations (Hoggett, 2006) and unconscious desires allied with primitive fears of survival (Fotaki, 2006; Obholzer, 1994). In sum, splitting and blame together support and enable idealization while all three mechanisms jointly contribute to the creation of blind spots.