

## SPLITTING KERNBERG: A CRITIQUE OF OTTO KERNBERG'S NOTION OF SPLITTING

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*A central dynamic observed in borderline patients is the mechanism of splitting. This article critiques Otto Kernberg's notion of splitting by examining its proposed role in normal development and in the borderline disorder. Specific difficulties with the use of a valence metaphor to account for splitting are explored, as well as the relationship between clinical data and metapsychology in Kernberg's object relations theory. It is argued that inconsistencies and logical contradictions, as well as the problem of reification, make the valence metaphor untenable in Kernberg's metapsychology.*

Otto Kernberg has received widespread recognition for his work on the etiology and treatment of the character disorders, particularly with the borderline personality organization. Central to his approach to the character disorders, especially the borderline personality disorder, is the notion of *splitting*. In fact, splitting constitutes the central dynamic in Kernberg's developmental model—both of healthy and of pathological development. This paper begins with an overview of Kernberg's object relations theory, considering splitting as both a normal aspect of development as well as the core of borderline pathology. We will explore the properties and characteristics that Kernberg attributes to the splitting mechanism. We then

evaluate whether these properties, particularly those of the valence model, are consistent with or derivable from his underlying ontological presuppositions.

### Overview of Kernberg's Object Relations Theory

In *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (1975/1985), Otto Kernberg describes the symptomatic, structural, and genetic/dynamic aspects of a broad range of character disorders that he designates as the borderline personality organization. He suggests that individuals with these disorders manifest a specific, stable personality organization that occupies a pathological area and severity between the neuroses and psychoses. These patients generally have a characteristic pathological ego structure, including the presence of chronic anxiety, neurotic symptoms such as multiple phobias, perverse sexual behavior, and diminished impulse control. In addition to these symptomatic features, a constellation of characteristic defenses are often present, most often splitting, primitive idealization, projective identification, denial, and omnipotence. Kernberg often attributes the etiology of such disorders to an early childhood environment in which an indifferent or rejecting mother both ignores and criticizes the child. Kernberg (1975/1985) subsequently proposes a comprehensive treatment approach that addresses the symptomatic features of the borderline disorders, focusing on the splitting mechanism.

Kernberg's theory attempts to integrate classical psychoanalytic drive theory with British object relations theory. In large part, Kernberg pursues this integration by reconceptualizing the nature of internalization. The process of internalization includes, according to Kernberg, introjections, identifications, and ego identity—all of which determine the degree of ego organization. The

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foundation of Kernberg's metapsychology hinges on a revised understanding of the introject, one component of the process of internalization. Introjects are understood as constellations of affective memory or units of internalized object relations (1984). These units are the memory traces of the infant's experience with the world, primarily with the mother. Such memory traces contain: 1) a primitive representation of the object, 2) a primitive representation of the self in interaction with the object and, 3) a primitive affect. Kernberg's model of development outlines the evolution of these three components of an introject. Moreover, his model charts the emergence of intrapsychic structure, the drives, and effective representations of the self and the external (object) world—all from the constituent aspects or elements of the introject. *Introjection* is the first stage in the process of internalization, and is thus especially critical as it embodies the infant's earliest affective experiences.

Development proceeds through the organizing influence of the affective component within the units of internalized object relations. In other words, the primitive affect associated with the primitive representations of self and other is the source of developmental change. In accord with Freud's dual instinct theory, primitive affect is treated in binary terms by Kernberg, being basically positive (pleasurable, "good," or libidinal) or negative (unpleasurable, "bad," or aggressive). These affective colorings represent the introjection's *active valence*. Kernberg refers to early affect in general, and good or bad introjects in particular, as having an "intense, overwhelming nature" whose effect "irradiates" all other perceptual elements. He asserts that the "overwhelming nature of early affective states is the cause of the valence of the introjection" (1984, p. 34-35). The critical feature of the active valence, and central to splitting in general, is the belief that the synthesis of opposite affective states cannot readily occur. As a result, splitting protects positive self- and object-images of the developing ego core by preventing excessive anxiety. Kernberg posits that "splitting protects the ego from conflicts by means of the dissociation or active maintaining apart of introjections and identifications of strongly conflictual nature, namely, those libidinally determined from aggressively determined" (1985, p. 26). Thus, good and bad affects constitute two valences that resist integration.

The valence property of object relations units (i.e., whether the memory was formed under "good" or "bad" experiences) is an essential aspect of Kernberg's metapsychology because it deter-

mines how object relations units, mainly self- and object-representations, interact with each other. Valence is both the cause and the mechanism that determines most early intrapsychic dynamics. Initially, affective memory traces with the same valence tend to agglutinate. This results in two main constellations: the good internal self-object representations "taking place under the positive valence of libidinal instinctual gratification" and the bad internal self-object representations "taking place under the negative valence of aggressive drive derivatives" (1976/1984, p. 30). These two constellations remain separate and yet both have "access to consciousness or to perceptual or motor control" (1976/1984, p. 44).

Furthermore, valence provides the underlying conceptual organization to the processes of Kernberg's stage theory of personality development. His theory can be viewed, in part, as an intrapsychic counterpart to Mahler's more relational model. While Kernberg emphasizes internalized object relations, Mahler focuses more directly on actual parent-child interactions. Thus, Kernberg attempts to provide a model of what is taking place intrapsychically that accounts for the behavioral changes described so poignantly by Mahler in *The Psychological Birth of the Infant* (Mahler, Bergman & Pine, 1975). For Kernberg stresses that "the buildup of dyadic or bipolar intrapsychic representations (self- and object-images) [are] reflections of the original infant-mother relationship and its later development" (1975/1985, p. 57).

His model of such intrapsychic development employs valence to account for processes of integration and differentiation of the object relations units. For example, after the 2-month old infant emerges from Mahler's first stage termed *normal autism*, two constellations of object relations units form. One constellation contains "good" self-object representations, the other the "bad" self-object representations. Note that self and object are not differentiated within these "good" and "bad" representations. The infant is unable to integrate these representations of opposite affective valence because the ego is believed to be too weak at this early stage. Moreover, the infant does not have the cognitive ability to differentiate self from object. With growing recognition of the mother, however, the "good" self-object representation differentiates into a separate "good" self representation and a "good" object representation. Likewise, the "bad" self-object representation also differentiates into its self and object components. Kernberg writes that

During this stage the separation of the libidinally invested and aggressively invested self- and object-representations becomes strengthened by active utilization of splitting, which is geared to protect the ideal, good relationship with mother from "contamination" by bad self-representations and bad representations of her. (1984, p. 67)

Splitting initially occurs at this early stage of the infant's intrapsychic development. In normal development, the infant utilizes splitting in a developmentally appropriate manner due to the lack of integrative ability by the forerunners of the ego. However, the infant soon abandons splitting in favor of other more healthy mechanisms, such as repression. In pathological development, splitting remains the primary defense mechanism and, as a result, causes the ego to remain too weak to integrate introjections with opposite affective valences.

In normal development, repression ultimately supercedes splitting. Repression results when "good" and "bad" self-representations begin to integrate to form a more realistic self-representation and "good" and "bad" object-representations begin to unite to form "total" object-representations. As "good" and "bad" valences are integrated, their affective valence (drive derivative) is "neutralized," or more specifically, the aggressive or libidinal derivatives are eliminated, producing neutralized energy (cf. Hartmann, 1964). As a result of this process, the valences provide a source of neutralized energy that can be used to create counter-cathexes and repress anxiety-provoking representations from consciousness. With repression, the dynamic unconscious and id come into being and threatening material can be held in the id—that material no longer has to be split off.

In this proposal, Kernberg differs from Freud and classical drive theory by holding that ego states precede the id. Kernberg maintains that the energy released by integration of oppositely valenced representations allows threatening material to be repressed. The repressed material is constitutive, thus essential, in the formation of the id. The formation of the id, therefore, follows the condition of split-off ego states, because that formation depends upon repression, and repression depends upon the energy released from the integration of those split-off ego states.

### The Borderline Personality Disorder

The borderline personality disorder occurs when there is a developmental fixation at the stage in which splitting is the primary defensive mechanism. This can occur because of excessive aggression

(either constitutionally determined or as a result of frustration) or because of constitutionally determined lack of anxiety tolerance. As a result, the "bad" or aggressive representations become too powerful or too threatening to the ego core, which is forming around the positive introjects. The infant attempts to expel the bad object by splitting the aggressive self-objects away from the good self-objects.

Splitting initiates a self-repeating "vicious" cycle (Kernberg, 1976/1984, 1975/1985). Because the ego is too weak to integrate representations of opposite valence, it relies on splitting, which requires less energy for counter-cathexes than repression. Because the individual relies on splitting for defensive purposes, integration of introjects does not occur, preventing the release of neutralized energy. Without neutralized energy to use for repression, the ego forerunners continue to remain weak. Thus, excessive aggression or lack of anxiety tolerance forces extreme reliance on splitting, which impedes further ego development.

### Critique

Throughout his writings, Kernberg refers to splitting as an essential defensive operation of the borderline personality organization. This importance derives in part because splitting as a defense becomes a principle cause of ego weakness. The dynamic of splitting is explained through the notion of valence, which provides Kernberg's central thesis on intrapsychic organization. The valence model describes how early experiences develop into mature self- and object-representations, and the psychic structure. In addition, in pathological conditions, valence accounts for the mechanism of the individual's attempt to protect the vulnerable ego from overwhelming anxiety. Because the notion of valence provides Kernberg's central principle of organization, it merits closer examination.

In one technical sense, "*valence*" is a term from chemistry that refers to "the quality that determines the number of atoms or groups with which any single atom or group will unite chemically" (Random House, 1987). More specifically it refers to the combining capability of a particular atom when compared to a hydrogen atom. A valence is a discrete value based on the state of the electrons in the outer shell of an atom. Linus Pauling (1959) notes that several more specific terms are increasingly utilized to refer to specific valence properties; in practice, though, valence "continues to be used as a general expression of the combining powers of the elements" (p. 194). Kernberg's valence,

however, does not exhibit any of the dynamic properties of chemical valence, and the dynamics that he does posit are inconsistent with those of chemical valence.

This critique can be extended to the emergence of the id and the development of repression out of splitting. Repression occurs with the integration of representations with opposite valence, thereby neutralizing the valences and creating a neutral energy that can be used for repression. However, this understanding is at odds with both the chemical and static electricity uses of valence. In chemistry, when atoms with complementary valences combine, they form a molecule that loses its electrical charge—it reaches a minimal energy state, and there is no leftover “neutral” energy, something quite different from the formation of neutral energy that Kernberg posits. Likewise, in static electricity, when opposite charges of equal intensity are introduced, they cancel out any charge—again, this results in a minimal energy condition, and no neutral energy results. Therefore, just as valence proved incapable of accounting for splitting and integration, here it is incapable of explaining repression.

The metapsychology of such notions as introjection, affective representation, and (more broadly) internalization, attempts to explain the dynamic properties of organization and defense through the theoretical interpretation of affective experiences within a valence model. However, by not using valence in either a strict chemical sense or in accordance with a static electricity metaphor, Kernberg loses the explanatory potential of the term. As a result, valence becomes just another descriptive term for the affect associated with an experience and leaves unexplained how affect can create the processes of agglutination, integration, and splitting.

Fundamentally, the basic dynamic laws that Kernberg proposes for “valence” in one phase of development transform into their conceptual opposite in a later phase—from likes attract to likes repel and from opposites repel to opposites attract. Furthermore, when opposite valences combine, Kernberg postulates the creation of new energy without accounting for its production. The basic properties of valence cannot account for these properties, nor does the proposed model clarify the conflicting and contradictory statements that attempt to account for the described mental processes.

Even if Kernberg’s equivocal properties of valence and the unclear construct of neutralized energy are set aside, the progression from splitting as a

defense mechanism to repression suffers from conceptual incoherence. On one hand, Kernberg states that splitting requires less energy than repression and thus occupies a position as a more primitive mechanism. The model then asserts that a weak ego does not have access to the additional energy needed to shift from splitting to repression. Repression now requires more energy than splitting. On the other hand, the model asserts that the undoing of splitting results in a release of energy, which is then available for repression—here repression is evidently a lower energy condition than splitting. Does repression require more or less energy than splitting? If more, then how does repression even get started, and how can shifting from splitting to repression—from a lower to a higher energy condition—release energy? If less, then why is there not a massive shift to the lower energy level condition of repression, and a runaway positive feedback of the release of energy bound up in splitting, yielding more repression, therefore still more energy, and so on. Why would a weak ego ever remain in the splitting condition, which requires higher energy?

Kernberg needs repression to constitute a higher energy condition than splitting in order to account for the developmental sequence from splitting to repression and for the difficulties encountered in moving from splitting to repression. He also needs repression to constitute a lower energy condition than splitting in order to account for the posited release of neutralized energy and the consequent development of repression. No matter what the underlying metaphor, these are logically contradictory requirements.

The valence model simply cannot account for either the structural or the mechanistic models Kernberg proposes here. The question thus remains: What is the explanatory basis of the metapsychology of splitting. Kernberg suggests that his theory of the borderline disorder is based on his clinical experience with patients who exhibited dramatic and radical shifts in emotional states. He posits that these emotional states correspond to internal ego states. Thus, for the borderline patient, there exist ego states that are split off from each other. These split ego states then account for the observed ‘split’ emotional states. This is the central epistemological and theoretical axis around which the rest of the model revolves.

The ability of this model to account for the phenomena that Kernberg intends suffers from several conceptual difficulties. First, and most crucial, the reasoning is circular: observed “split”

emotions justify split ego states that justify split emotions. Second, the relationship between ego states and emotional states is not clear: Why should split ego states necessarily cause split emotional states? Kernberg does not explain, he only presupposes a direct relationship between ego states and emotional functioning. Thus, not only the proposed explanatory dynamic of splitting, but also the initial motivation for the notion of splitting, exhibit conceptual limitations. It appears that splitting can provide, at best, no more than a descriptive, and not an explanatory, scheme for expressing certain patterns of behavior among borderline patients.

On a phenomenological level, the borderline patient exhibits what clinicians often describe as an *oscillation* between different emotional states. There is an internal logic to these oscillations that seems to have been lost in the focus on intrapsychic dynamics. An extreme emotional state contains the seeds of its own change. For example, an all-good emotional state involves unrealistic hopes, demands, and expectations, making disillusionment an inevitability. An all-bad emotional state is likewise ripe for disconfirmation when the individual discovers that there may be some "good" in the world, lifting the terrible burden of an all-bad perspective, and producing relief, gratitude, renewed hopes, and expectations. In this view, an instability of the emotional extremes is inherent in the nature of those explicit emotional processes. The reification of clinical observation into psychic structure and process has perhaps inhibited noticing that some of the experience of the borderline patient can be grasped when we begin to understand the internal logic of their phenomenology. (For a similar point regarding the neuroses, see Shapiro, 1965, 1981).

## Conclusion

Valence remains a descriptive term that Kernberg substitutes for affect. But affect per se is incapable of accounting for agglutination and differentiation. Moreover, the inconsistent and self-contradictory properties, which Kernberg postulates for valence, are not likely to be satisfied by any coherent model of dynamic process.

Furthermore, the postulated properties of splitting itself—independent of its supposed grounding in valence—result in internal contradictions. Splitting is required to be a lower energy condition than repression to explain why a weak ego cannot give splitting-up in favor of repression (it lacks

sufficient energy), but splitting is also required to be a higher energy condition than repression to explain how the lower energy level defense of repression can release energy.

Still further, splitting is a locus of the difficulty surrounding the relationship between metapsychology and clinical data. Kernberg often attempts to support his intrapsychic model by referring to instances of splitting from clinical work. In addition, advocates of object relations theory frequently assert that object relations theory is at least able to provide an explanation of clinical data, especially the character disorders. The notion of splitting is often taken as a paradigmatic example of the important insights and contributions of object relations theory. However, Eagle (1984) and Grunbaum (1984) have both emphasized the limitations of using clinical data as a foundation for metapsychology (see also Christopher & Bickhard, 1989). More specifically, Kernberg's model of splitting contains circular reasoning and conceptual confusion. This occurs primarily due to the reification of clinical observation into explanatory concepts. Thus, "split" emotional states are reified into split ego states, which are then supposed to account for the split emotional states. It would seem that, in spite of the focus on important clinical phenomena, the metapsychology of splitting has confused any potential new understanding.

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