15 Toward a Pure Psychology of Inner Conflict

Robert D. Stolorow, Ph.D.

The centrality of inner conflict in human psychological life has been a fundamental tenet of Freudian psychoanalysis since its inception. In recent years, however, long-held assumptions about the nature and origins of conflict have increasingly become subject to critical reappraisal. Arguments put forth by a number of authors (Gill, 1976; Klein, 1976; Schafer, 1976; Stolorow, 1978) have persuasively demonstrated the extent to which the psychoanalytic understanding of conflict has been obstructed by classical metapsychology and, in particular, by the theory of instinctual drive. Proposals have been offered that would replace the mechanistic imagery of a mental apparatus disposing of drive energies with a psychology of conflict recast in the language of clashing personal purposes (Klein, 1976) and human actions (Schafer, 1976). It is the thesis of this chapter that from a psychoanalytic perspective conflict is to be viewed always and only as a subjective state of the individual person, and that it is the task of psychoanalytic inquiry to illuminate the specific contexts of meaning in which such conflicts take form. I am thus proposing a strictly hermeneutic approach to conflict, in line with Kohut's (1982) desire to reframe psychoanalysis as a pure psychology.

The frequently posed antithesis between conflict theory and Kohut's (1977) self psychology is, in my view, an artifact of the embeddedness of the traditional concept of conflict in classical metapsychology and drive theory. When conflict is freed from the encumbering image of an energy disposal apparatus and is pictured solely as a subjective state of the person, then the supposed antithesis between conflict theory and self psychology vanishes. When conflict is liberated from the doctrine of the primacy of instinctual drive, then the specific meaning-contents that give rise to subjective states of conflict becomes an empirical question to be explored psychoanalytically. The focus of psychoanalytic inquiry then shifts from the presumed vicissitudes of drive to the "intersubjective contexts" (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984; Stolorow, Brandchaft, & Atwood, 1983) in which conflict states crystallize, and to the impact of these contextual configurations on the person's psychological organization. Such a stance holds profound implications for one's clinical approach to conflicts that emerge in the psychoanalytic situation, a subject to which I return later.

Another advantage of viewing conflict solely as a subjective state of the person is that it invites a consideration of the developmental origins and, especially, the developmental prerequisites of particular conflict states (see Stolorow & Lachmann, 1980). In general it may be said that the experience of the self-in-contrast presupposes that some minimal degree of structuralization of the sense of self has been reliably achieved. Thus, in those disintegrative states in which the cohesion of self-experience becomes significantly lost and immersion in an archaic selfobject tie is required for its restoration, states of conflict between clashing motivational strivings will not predominate in the person's subjective field, because the imperative need to reestablish the required tie is experientially preeminent. When the required tie is reestablished, by contrast, and self-integrity thereby becomes restored, then inner conflict may emerge into prominence—for example, when central strivings and affective qualities of the person are believed to be inimical to the maintenance of the bond. It is in these fluctuating figureground relationships between conflict states and archaic selfobject configurations that the experiential meaning of Kohut's (1977) concept of complementarity between conflict psychology and self psychology can be found (Stolorow, 1983).

Observations and reconstructions of self development suggest that it involves at least two overlapping processes (see Atwood & Stolorow, 1984; Brandchaft, 1985; Kohut, 1977; Wolf, 1980): (1) the consolidation of a nuclear sense of coherence and well-being, and (2) the differentiation of self from other and the corresponding establishment of an individualized array of guiding aspirations and ideals. Critical to these structuralization processes is the attuned responsiveness of the caregiving surround to the child's evolving emotional states and needs (Socarides & Stolorow, 1984/1985). The child's needs for such specific responsiveness undergo a series of maturational shifts. Conflicts may arise and become structuralized at any point in this developmental progression. With regard to self-consolidation, such conflicts will center around the child's basic needs for mirroring responses and for connectedness to idealized sources of comfort and strength. With regard to self-differentiation, conflicts will center around the child's need for the continuance of selfobject ties that can serve as a source of affirming, facilitating, and solidifying support for his strivings for self-differentiation and for the establishment of individualized goals and values. Under the influence of drive and tripartite structural theory, analysts have tended to interpret these conflicts as originating in oedipal and preoedipal.
drive fixations and their corresponding superego structures and forerunners. This concept of inevitably structuralized, instinctually derived conflict obscures the contextual configurations in which such conflicts arise, limiting and derailing analytic progress. I suggest that the understanding of emergent conflict is better served by recognizing that, at every phase of development, the structuralization of conflict is determined by the specific intersubjective field in which it is embedded, just as its resolution in analysis is determined by the intersubjective dialogue in which it reemerges.

If parents cannot adapt themselves to the changing selfobject needs of their developing child, then the child will adapt himself to what is available in order to maintain the required ties. This, I believe, is the route by which inner conflict becomes structuralized and by which civilized man continues to exchange “a portion of his possibilities for happiness for a portion of security” (Freud, 1930, p. 115). This thesis will now be exemplified through an examination of the origins of those subjective states that ordinarily are grouped under the heading of “superego conflict.”

“Superego Conflict”

Traditionally, the concepts of superego and superego conflict, and the attendant role of guilt in pathogenesis, have been formulated in terms of the metapsychological assumptions of classical drive theory. It is my contention here that the experiential configurations covered by the terms superego and superego conflict originate in the child’s perceptions of what is required of him to maintain the selfobject ties that are vital to his well-being. Once these requirements become structuralized as invariant organizing principles of the child’s subjective world, he will be vulnerable to painful feelings of guilt, shame, or anxiety whenever his inner strivings threaten to violate them.

Most often the requirements for maintaining needed ties involve the child’s having to serve significant selfobject functions for his parents. When a parent consistently requires an archaic state of oneness with a child, for example, then the child’s strivings for more differentiated selfhood become the source of severe conflict and guilt. In such instances, the child perceives that his acts of self-demarcation and unique affective qualities are experienced by the parent as psychologically damaging, often leading to the child developing a perception of himself as omnipotently destructive. This self-perception as a cruel and dangerous destroyer, originating in the parent’s need for the child as an archaic selfobject, both obstructs the process of self-boundary formation and becomes an enduring source of guilt and self-punishment—the “harsh superego” and “sadistic superego forerunners” of classical theory.

Example 1: An Adolescent Crisis

Sally, a 17-year-old girl, was referred by her former therapist, a woman in her 60s, because the treatment had reached a stalemate. The patient was severely depressed, was relentlessly self-critical and self-attacking, thought frequently of killing herself, and was plagued by recurrent pains in her legs that apparently were of psychogenic origin. The referring therapist conceived of the patient’s current intractable state as a manifestation of a “negative therapeutic reaction” rooted in severe masochism and a highly sadistic superego.

Sally seemed to her new analyst to be an attractive and very intelligent youngster, self-reflective to a fault, and acutely attuned to the needs and feelings of others. The imperative that she incessantly please and satisfy others and sacrifice herself to their expectations quickly emerged as the dominant theme in her psychological life, an important element in the transference relationship with her former therapist that had gone unnoticed.

Sally’s parents were divorced when she was 4 years old, after which her father became absorbed in an endless succession of short-lived affairs and showed little interest in his daughter. Her mother would frequently speak disparagingly about him to Sally, and the patient herself recalled numerous humiliating incidents in which he let her down—for example, failing to pay her school tuition bills and cancelling scheduled visits with her at the last minute.

The loss of and severe disappointments by her father had the effect of greatly intensifying the bond between Sally and her mother. A central characteristic of this tie was that her mother, who was chronically depressed, had come to require an archaic sense of oneness with Sally as a selfobject—that is, Sally’s unfailing, loving responsiveness and continual availability had become essential to the maintenance of her mother’s feeling of well-being. Her mother thus experienced Sally’s phase-appropriate strivings for individualized
selfhood as a profound psychological injury and made Sally feel as if these developmental thrusts were deliberate and cruel attempts to damage and destroy her. Not surprisingly, this pattern had reached crisis proportions during Sally's adolescence, with her mother reacting to her growing interest in boys by dissolving in tears and jealous rages. Sally, in turn, felt unbearably guilty and became increasingly depressed, self-attacking, and suicidal.

Believing that the source of the patient's difficulties was to be found in conflicts over aggressive drive derivatives, her former therapist had begun to offer interpretations of Sally's presumed unconscious aggressive wishes, both in relation to her mother and in the transference. Sally's condition significantly worsened, leading the therapist, who was becoming increasingly alarmed, to make the referral to another analyst. It was reconstructed that

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- 196 -

the first therapist's interpretations of aggressive wishes were felt by Sally to replicate her mother's view of her as inherently cruel and destructive, and they therefore only exacerbated her guilty self-attacks.

It soon became apparent that because of her mother's archaic enmeshment with her as a selfobject, Sally's strivings for greater self-demarcation had become the source of unbearable conflict and guilt for her. As the analyst repeatedly clarified for the patient how her mother reacted to her thrusts toward more differentiated selfhood as if they were expressions of destructive aggression, and how this was the principal reason for her guilt and self-attacks, her depression and other symptoms lifted, as her stalled adolescent development was permitted to resume. She was able to become involved with a steady boyfriend and to decide to go away to college, though her mother disapproved of both. In the transference she had found a longed for, idealizable, paternal selfobject who helped extricate her from the web of her mother's archaic needs and who aligned himself with her quest for a more distinct self-definition.

Not unexpectedly, Sally returned to analysis a year after her graduation from college. While the earlier brief course of treatment had helped to free her adolescent development from the grip of her mother's needs, she now found the early pattern of bondage to her mother becoming repeated in her professional and personal relationships. Her wrenching self-demarcation guilt and the corresponding perception of herself as a cruel destroyer (her "superego conflicts") had become structuralized by her early formative experiences with her mother as enduring features of her psychological life that now required engagement in an intensive analytic process.

Example 2: Reactive Depressions

Tom was a 57-year-old man with considerable artistic endowment and, when functioning well, of substantial charm. He had compensated for repeated failures in school by a prodigious regime of self-teaching and thus had acquired expertise not only in cultural and artistic matters, but also in such diverse fields as astronomy, anthropology, and history. He was, however, plagued by recurrent episodes of severe and paralyzing depression, which always followed upon some personal setback. One regular precipitant was the depressive mood of his wife, which he always attributed to some failing of his own. A lack of psychological differentiation was also shown in his reactions to any extended physical separations from her, which produced profound disintegrative changes in his state of mind. To counteract these, he would engage in brief sexual affairs that served to restore a sense of aliveness and fend off frightening feelings of apathy and "deadness." Other

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- 197 -

frequent triggering events for his depressions were unfavorable reviews of his work or contemporaries being chosen over him for assignments or awards in his field.

In these reactive states he would feel "defeated," find it difficult to get out of bed, and experience a "black cloud" descending over him, along with a nearly complete loss of motivation. He would become beset with intense hypochondriacal worries, feel convinced that his creativity had left him, and brood obsessively about his impending financial demise. He would then sink into an orgy of self-recrimination for his state of mind, alternating with intense and virulent self-pity for the wretchedness of his existence. It soon became apparent that for Tom any trace of depressive affect was a source of severe conflict and ruthless self-attack.

Tom's mother emerged in his memories as an intensely anxious, childlike, and volatile woman, chronically disappointed with her passive and ineffectual husband. From the beginning she was overburdened by the demands of her vigorous first child, Tom, and after 18 months left him in the care of her own inadequate parents, only to reclaim him 2 years later. His subsequent childhood years were marked by frequent scenes in which his mother would bitterly bemoan her fate in getting married and having children, immersing herself in dramatic displays of self-pity, especially when she was disappointed by Tom's maturation lags or failures in school. Often she would fall to the floor in a "dead" faint or retire to her room, pull down the shades, and remain in bed for long periods of time. In
consequence of countless experiences such as these, Tom came to believe that his own painful disappointments in himself, as well as his depressive reactions to them, were a source of unbearable psychological injury for his mother.

In the analysis Tom could sustain no positive sense of self in the wake of his recurrent episodes of devitalization, regardless of the suffices he had achieved. It became clear that his vicious self-reproaches, in reaction to disappointments and to the depressive moods to which his vulnerability exposed him, completely undermined his resilience and, in circular fashion, further exacerbated his depressive states.

After prolonged, detailed observation it became apparent that Tom consistently, if silently, perceived the analyst to be painfully disappointed in him and in himself whenever the patient felt depressed. Each depressive state was colored by the invariant meanings his moods had come to acquire—meaning structures that now crystallized in the intersubjective context of the analytic dialogue, which reviled critical pathogenic elements of his early tie to his mother. These meanings included Tom's belief that he was cursed with a fatal and unyielding defect (his vulnerability to depressive experiences), that he was completely unacceptable and unwanted as he was, and that his depressive feelings were a constant, painful reminder to his

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objects—now the analyst—of their failures. Thus it could be seen that Tom's need to integrate depressive experiences had been a lifelong source of conflict for him, because of his deeply embedded conviction that the disclosure of such feelings was psychologically damaging to those on whom he relied.

This transference configuration invariably materialized with the first sapping of Tom's vitality. He would try desperately to restore his buoyancy, as well as the analyst's, by offering reassurances, but these would inevitably collapse beneath his (and, he believed, the analyst's) knowledge that he was only attempting to cover up the flaw he had once again exposed. Tom's ruthless self-reproaches (symptoms par excellence of a "harsh superego") now became comprehensible as urgent attempts to maintain his connectedness with the analyst, much as he had found it necessary to do with his mother, when he believed that his state of mind had become a source of unbearable disappointment for the analyst as it had been for his mother. Only by confessing his worthlessness could he in some measure absolve himself and restore the tie, joining the analyst in the latter's misfortune in having him for a patient.

Frequently patients who show symptoms such as these and who seem not to make progress in analysis are assumed to suffer from a basic conflict over determining an object. It is further widely believed that such conflict originates in the intense destructiveness or envy that dependence mobilizes. Tom certainly experienced enormous conflict over his continued needs for objects and this was an important source of his self-loathing. This conflict, however, was not rooted in an instinctually determined sadism. Rather, it stemmed from two central organizing principles of his subjective life. One was the degree of his vulnerability to separations, rejections, or criticism, a product of his arrested need for confirming and comforting selfobject ties. A second was the extent to which he believed that he must accept blame for any disjunctive experience in order to preserve the needed ties. He thus blamed his depressive reactions for the selfobject failures that produced them, with the result that his "hopeless flaws" seemed repeatedly and relentlessly confirmed.

Especially prone to becoming the source of subsequent conflict are those functions, such as affect regulation, whose maturation is impaired by the vulnerabilities and needs of the mother (Socarides & Stolorow, 1984/1985). In the case of Tom, his mother could not tolerate or accept his sadness or disappointments, experiences that therefore could never become integrated or modulated. He was thus unable to acquire the capacity to comfort himself when distressed, and his depressive moods remained a source of unyielding conflict and self-hatred throughout his life, until the pathogenic tie to his mother was reanimated, clarified, and worked through in the analytic transference.

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**Conclusion**

When conflict is liberated from the doctrine of the primacy of instinctual drive and is pictured solely as a subjective state of the person, then the specific meaning-contexts that give rise to inner conflict can be illuminated psychoanalytically. Conflict states often arise when central strivings and affective qualities of the person are believed to be inimical to the maintenance of an important self object bond. In the two clinical cases presented, structuralized patterns of guilty self-recrimination and self-blame, traditionally covered by the concepts of superego and superego conflict, were found to originate in the patients' childhood perceptions of what was required of them to sustain ties essential to their well-being. When these requirements were revived in the analysis, interpreted, and worked through in their intersubjective contexts, the self-attacking attitudes were significantly alleviated.
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References


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