

**DIGGING UP THE PAST**  
**OBJECT RELATIONS AND SUBPERSONALITIES**

by

**Chris Meriam**

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## PREFACE

Roberto Assagioli (1965) used the term “subpersonalities” to refer to those often-conflicting, semi-autonomous subsystems within the personality which have also been called “the various selves” (William James) or “ego states” (Eric Berne). Working with subpersonalities has been an important aspect of psychosynthesis practice throughout its eighty-year history, and no published treatment of psychosynthesis seems without a description of subpersonalities and their harmonization within the larger personality.

While techniques abound for working with subpersonalities—not only in psychosynthesis but now in other approaches as well—a precise and comprehensive understanding of subpersonality development has yet to emerge within psychosynthesis theory. How do subpersonalities initially form? Are they normal and healthy, or a sign of early wounding? How are they related to early childhood experience? What are the deeper psychodynamics underlying subpersonality work?

In this second monograph of the series, psychosynthesis therapist and theorist Chris Meriam seeks to answer such questions, and in so doing makes a significant contribution both to subpersonality theory and to psychosynthesis as a whole. He locates the beginnings of subpersonalities within the early relational environment of childhood—in childhood “object relations,” to use psychoanalytic terminology.

Drawing on insights from his understanding of object relations theory and from his clinical work with clients, Meriam discusses the psychological wounding which occurs in childhood, and the subsequent splitting of the personality caused by this wounding. He then uses these insights to describe how this early splitting creates a basic matrix within the personality from which the wide variety of subpersonalities are then formed. As it turns out, subpersonalities are branches of a tree whose roots are firmly embedded in early childhood relationships.

Note that throughout the author uses a mixture of masculine and feminine pronouns in his writing, thereby generally avoiding “he/she” constructions. Also, we here follow a convention adopted for the entire monograph series: the first appearance of psychosynthesis technical terms within the work are printed in bold type, indicating both their technical character and that they are elaborated elsewhere in the literature.

Finally, let us say that we are very pleased to present this new addition to the Psychosynthesis Palo Alto Monograph Series. The Series is dedicated to the research and development of core concepts in psychosynthesis theory and practice. We here attempt to respond to Assagioli’s wish that psychosynthesis might both draw upon, and enrich, other streams of psychological thought.

In the near future, we hope to offer monographs exploring such topics as personal identity; psychosynthesis and existential psychology; the survival personality and authentic personality (“false self” and “true self”); and the two dimensions of Self-realization.

John Firman and Ann Russell  
Palo Alto, California  
June, 1994



## DIGGING UP THE PAST OBJECT RELATIONS AND SUBPERSONALITIES

Subpersonalities, as they are often described in psychosynthesis theory, are semi-autonomous structures comprising roles and associated traits, reflecting a divided psyche of unmet needs and intricate, compensating behaviors. They are portrayed as the many “selves” inside of us that have their own agendas and wants at heart and have little conscious awareness of, and therefore concern for, the effects of their biases on other subpersonalities or on the larger personality as a whole.

Roberto Assagioli indicated in his book *Psychosynthesis* (1965) that the dynamic interplay of subpersonalities in “ordinary people” results in subtle and sometimes baffling personality shifts. These shifts and alterations can occur apart from the person’s conscious awareness and intention, often leaving the person only dimly aware that any change has occurred, and with “only a thin thread of memory” that he is different now than he was only moments ago (Ibid., p. 75).

As to whether or not these common subsystems within the personality are intrinsic to human development, or the result of psychological wounding, Assagioli gave us no unequivocal answer. However, he did attribute the origins of subpersonalities to the “*tragic* contrasts between thought and feeling, between reason and faith, between conviction and adoration” (quoted in Sliker, 1992, p. 12, emphasis added). I believe his use of the word “tragic” is significant, for it implies that debilitating conflicts among various polarities in the personality are not natural or intrinsic to human existence. A “tragic contrast” between opposites implies calamity and disaster, not natural development. Tragedy is often destabilizing to the natural order and is experienced as an infraction of one’s sense of continuity and meaning.

Furthermore, from Assagioli’s work it seems clear that he did not view life as intrinsically tragic; he did not believe that alienation, isolation, and destructive conflict were necessary aspects of the human condition. Rather, he saw that the psyche,

the world, and the universe itself comprised opposites which were the products of natural laws. These opposites in their natural state not only existed in harmony with each other, but were necessary counterpoints contributing to overall balance and stability. Indeed, his system of psychosynthesis itself is based on the premise that harmony among polarities reflects a natural state, even when that harmony involves dynamic, creative opposites such as love and will, receptivity and dynamism, and "the fundamental polarity between the human personality as a whole and the Transpersonal Self..." (Assagioli, 1973, p. 104).

I believe that Assagioli viewed subpersonalities as tragic formations because they are based on unnatural fragmentation and imbalance within the personality, reflecting a fragmented and tragic environment. This wounding of the personality makes it difficult for the individual to hold natural opposites, extremes, and contradictory experiences in a creative and coherent way. However, since Assagioli did not leave us with a detailed theory of subpersonality development, we can only speculate about his thoughts on the matter.

### THREE COMPONENTS OF CURRENT SUBPERSONALITY THEORY

There appear to be at least three generally-accepted ideas associated with subpersonality theory to date. The first idea proposed is that a subpersonality is "a synthesis of habit patterns, traits, complexes, and other psychological elements" organized around "an inner drive, or urge, which strives to be expressed" (Vargiu, 1974, p. 60). Somewhere around 1970, Assagioli expressed this concept to psychosynthesis theorist James Vargiu (from a transcribed conversation, courtesy of Ann Russell).

In the same conversation, Assagioli also said that subpersonality theory could be a potential bridge of his work to that of Freud, Jung, and Reich, via their concepts of "complexes," as well as a point of contact with behaviorism, in that subpersonalities are strongly conditioned by the environment. Vargiu subsequently wrote the first substantial article on subpersonality theory (*Ibid.*), drawing heavily on the work of psychosynthesis



theorists Steven Kull and Betsie Carter-Haar at the Psycho-synthesis Institute in Palo Alto.

Of course, if subpersonalities are the “tragic formations” Assagioli indicated, then a subpersonality’s motivations and means of expression are an attempt at reclaiming something vital that was jeopardized, threatened, and subsequently dissociated from the personality as a whole. Such a subpersonality is organized in a way that reflects an attempt (through compromised behavior) to regain a unified, coherent expression of the whole person, while at the same time, paradoxically, exhibiting an amount of dissonance or conflict with the conscious personality. My belief is that this paradoxical stance of a subpersonality—born of conflict and a striving for wholeness—is caused by psychological wounding received within the early environment.

The second idea or component which has gained general acceptance originated with Assagioli also, and it too was developed in the 1970s by Kull and Vargiu (*Ibid.*) at the Palo Alto Institute. This is the idea that the harmonization of subpersonalities takes place through a number of stages, each with its own tasks and outcomes. Assagioli outlined the stages of **recognition** and **acceptance** in conversation with Kull, who then added the stages of **coordination**, **integration**, and **synthesis**.

The third and last aspect of accepted theory was also inspired by Assagioli and developed by Kull in the 1970s. This is the theory that subpersonalities have an inherent or core potential for expressing superconscious energies, transpersonal qualities, or collective archetypes. Thus, for example, one might enter into an exploration of subpersonalities with the aim of uncovering and expressing the transpersonal quality most congruent with that particular subpersonality. (Information regarding the early work of Steven Kull comes from him via a conversation with John Firman, 1994.)

Much of this early work is concerned with developing a process for organizing subpersonalities around an integrating center—**personal self** or “**I**”—in order to establish a more unified, harmonious personality. We are left, however, with little speculation about, understanding of, or insight into a subpersonality’s formation and development within the early childhood environment. It is assumed that subpersonalities exist and that we all

have them—as though we have stepped into a game in progress. Somehow we are on the subpersonality playing field and have little idea how we, or they, got there.

Since the 1970s, many excellent psychosynthesis theorists and teachers have echoed this early work by Assagioli, Kull, Carter-Haar, and Vargiu regarding subpersonalities. Nevertheless, even more recent writers such as Piero Ferrucci (1982), Diana Whitmore (1991), Gretchen Sliker (1992), and Molly Young Brown (1993), who have made significant contributions to psychosynthesis literature, tend to support this “game in progress.” The extant published literature does little to develop subpersonality theory beyond the earlier work, usually presenting variations of the three ideas listed above. The literature as a whole does not take us into the deeper developmental roots of subpersonalities, nor attempt to fulfill Assagioli’s hope that subpersonality theory become a point of deep contact with other streams of psychological thought.

In contrast to this general trend, Tom Yeomans (Yeomans, 1992) is one contemporary psychosynthesis thinker who has pointed to the depths underlying subpersonality formation. He states that subpersonalities “are the surface structure of the personality” which rest upon a substratum of identifications occurring early in development—a deeper level “formed by trauma, the introjection of an idea, or world view, object relation development, or cultural, racial, and transgenerational patterns of experience.” To my knowledge, Yeomans has not published any further thinking beyond the general outline presented in his brief article.

An exception to this dearth of psychodynamic research in psychosynthesis literature is Betsie Carter-Haar’s (Carter-Haar, 1975) early, illuminating article, “Identity And Personal Freedom,” which offers a developmental approach to subpersonalities from incipient to complex states, based on early trauma and subsequent adaptive behaviors in response to environmental constraints. To my knowledge, Carter-Haar has also not pursued further inquiry into her interesting initial work.

A last exception is John Firman’s (Firman & Russell, 1994) work in progress, *Healing The Human Spirit*, which brings psychosynthesis theory back to its psychoanalytic roots. Firman’s well-crafted work lays the foundation for an understanding of

subpersonality formation—and the higher and lower unconscious—as the result of wounding to the personality within the early caregiving matrix.

Outside the field of psychosynthesis, John Rowan also agrees that the formation of subpersonalities can be traced back to early childhood wounding. In his book, *Subpersonalities* (1990), Rowan painstakingly researches a vast array of subpersonality material both current and historical and suggests a subpersonality developmental scheme based on the early splitting of the personality into an “OK” and a “non-OK” sense of self. Rowan goes on to describe the dramatic and long range aftereffects of this “primal split” and essentially formulates the emergence of subpersonalities from this. Rowan’s work offers plausible insights into the causes of subpersonality formation and development, and his acknowledgment of trauma as the basis for initial splitting of the personality is valuable.

But why is it important to recognize and work with a deeper level of conditioning underlying subpersonalities? Why is it not altogether legitimate to work head-on, face-to-face, and in the moment with a subpersonality, and thereby resolve most psychological issues and conflicts? My answer is that it is legitimate to the degree that such an approach can provide short-term relief, but it will inevitably leave the deeper structures unchanged and a continuing source of life difficulties. In Yeomans’ words, “Subpersonality work alone, therefore, conducted without regard for this deeper dimension, is palliative, but incomplete in affecting real personality change” (Op. cit.). In the following section, I shall relate my clinical experience which led me to this same conclusion.

### SOME LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT SUBPERSONALITY THEORY

Several years ago I seriously cut back on my clinical use of traditional subpersonality methods and techniques such as holding dialogues between parts, moving back and forth into parts, observing from center, speaking from center, etc. I made this decision in order to focus on deeper psychological issues of abuse and neglect which kept surfacing in spite of my best efforts to

work with these issues within the discrete subpersonalities my clients and I could recognize.

At that point in my clinical work with others I did not understand the relationship of intolerable childhood experiences to the phenomenon of ego splitting, nor did I appreciate the impact and pervasive conditioning which early trauma and wounding could have on the individual's life. These remembered traumatic events (defined here as any event or interaction that exceeds the child's capacity to fully engage, feel, and integrate), seemed to traverse the entire core of those I worked with. This wounding was not state specific to any particular psychic structure one could call a subpersonality.

In a nutshell, I found the subpersonality model as it was currently developed, and as I was using it, to be a shallow and potentially harmful approach because it promised a simple resolution and a time-span for changing and healing which was misleading and unrealistic vis-à-vis the client's more formidable issues of early wounding. When I sat with my clients and heard their distress, I witnessed wounding that was systemic to the entire personality rather than contained within the discrete shelter of a particular subpersonality. I was seeing and hearing some of the original reasons why such a multitude of selves had emerged for these individuals, and why these parts had developed into such complex structures.

This wounding and early fragmentation of self was a compelling force that overpowered their ability in session to disidentify from, or observe, their emotions and behaviors from a personal center (as a traditional subpersonality approach might encourage). Their pain was complicated, deep and undeniably real for them. Interventions aimed at helping them observe their memories of abuse from a place of freedom, or personifying and elevating the tragedy in their lives to the super-conscious for healing, succeeded only in diminishing and discounting in their own minds the magnitude of oppressive conflicts that had brought them to seek therapy in the first place.

Clinicians who work with trauma and abuse issues know the degree to which the therapist must authentically and faithfully model a variety of healing postures in order for a client to gain any amount of psychological distance from unspeakable memories. This is particularly true if the client's more relational needs from the therapist—such as empathic understanding, presence

without speaking, space to grieve, and overall responsiveness and attunement to the presenting issues—are not carefully and consistently met.

In these instances, it is shortsighted to overemphasize integrative strategies which encourage clients to take charge of their “traumatized parts” in order to achieve greater harmony within the personality. In the words of psychosynthesis therapist Victoria Tackett, “Guides [therapists] must be careful not to minimize the problem by treating victims of mental and emotional abuse as though the problem were merely an unruly victim subpersonality to be integrated” (Tackett, 1988, p. 29).

Such a prematurely integrative approach, if not naive, is perhaps biased in its unilateral focus on holism. The error in such a focus is an underestimation of the environmental conditions and traumatic experiences which may have contributed to the earlier fragmentation of this whole self.

Having pointed to some of the limitations of applying subpersonality work inappropriately in the clinical setting, let me now briefly address the strengths of this approach when it is employed well.

Subpersonality techniques aimed at helping clients disidentify from conflicting internal forces, or assisting in their experience of personal power and authority distinct from compelling behaviors and intense feelings, are extremely useful when they are introduced appropriately in the context of ongoing psychotherapy. For example, when such techniques are offered at the onset of therapy, they can assuage anxiety in a client who feels “crazy” for having so many “voices” and conflicting feelings inside. Here subpersonality techniques can be extremely useful in helping clients experience the potential for a relationship with a part of themselves (through a gestalt or “parts” dialogue) which had previously seemed unmanageable. The techniques can bring about an immediate sense of empowerment and a view of the psychological landscape which can set the stage for deeper reflections and explorations.

Also, subpersonality techniques applied later on in the therapeutic alliance are useful for orchestrating insight and eventual cooperation in the personality at a time when the client is healed enough from early trauma to take charge of a self-coordinating process without retraumatizing himself and falling back

into earlier patterns. Subpersonality techniques can be effectively applied as a client feels increasingly confident that his pain, trauma, hurts, reactions, and disappointments, are being heard, held, and contained by the therapist. The therapist, in turn, must be capable of modeling a relational approach to the client which transcends techniques and models, and which is significantly and consistently superior to the rebuffs and denials experienced in the client's early history with caregivers (see Stolorow, 1992).

However, I believe that subpersonality techniques require a larger theoretical framework to be ultimately effective. When they are applied in a clinical setting without support of a richer theoretical framework, they are a bit like fish out of water—engaging and interesting to look at, but non-sustaining since they are separated from any meaningful context for understanding the deeper issues of psychological injury and fragmentation of the personality. From my own experience, I have come to believe that any depth subpersonality theory must acknowledge and elaborate an understanding of the phenomenon of ego-splitting as a defence against early intolerable experiences and as a precursor to subpersonality formation. This link between childhood wounding, subsequent splitting, early object relations formations, and the later development of subpersonalities, seems important if we are to seek a deeper path of integration for our clients.

Therefore, I have drawn upon object relations theory from contemporary psychoanalytic research in order to support my current understanding of the splitting of the personality in early childhood. By doing this, I have discovered that psychoanalysis and psychosynthesis interface with one another at the point where psychoanalytic object relations theory ends and where psychosynthesis subpersonality theory begins.

In the remainder of this monograph, I will clarify these discoveries by: 1) defining my understanding and use of the term "object relations"; 2) reviewing the psychoanalytic object-relations theory of early childhood relationships, trauma, and the dynamics of splitting; 3) outlining a psychosynthesis theory of these phenomena; and 4) exploring how these early relationships ultimately function in the formation of subpersonalities.

## THE NATURE OF OBJECT RELATIONS

The term “object relations” as used in this monograph describes, 1) the nature of a relationship between two people, and 2) the way in which that relationship becomes internalized and represented within each individual. As I understand it, this is significantly different from early psychoanalytic theory and Freud’s drive theory. These earlier theories implied that an “object” was of secondary importance and only necessary as a connecting point or target for the individual’s drive. Of primary importance was the individual’s drive which was viewed as being in constant search for a libidinal or sexual object. The object could be a “thing,” animate or inanimate, or a person. What seemed to matter more than the infant’s relationship to her caregivers was the infant’s success at targeting or attaching her inborn drive to someone or something.

My own understanding and use of the term “object relations” is that what in fact drives us is our need to be in relationship, and that we will go to any length to establish and/or maintain relationship with a significant other, whether he or she is real or imaginary, good or bad, positive or negative. In this sense, what I internalize is not so much a representation of someone in my life who impressed or affected me, but my *relationship* to that someone who impressed or affected me—I remember and call up the interplay of experiences I had with that individual. So, whenever I call up a parent image or “object,” it always comes (implicitly or explicitly) with its corresponding “me” part which is sometimes referred to as an “ego” or “self.” Object relations are just that—ourselves in relationship to others, as well as the ways in which we have internalized those relationship and been shaped by them.

For example, I can at this moment easily call up an image of my mother or father and recall an incident where they were either displeased with me or congratulatory about something I had done. In either case, and without too much effort and focus on my part, I can begin to feel my response to either their admonishment or their praise. What has happened to me at this moment is that I have “called up,” and recreated inside of me, an internal representation of a particular way my parents and I related together. Interestingly, I cannot really say if what I

am experiencing, in terms of my feelings and responses, is in fact a precise replica of my actual relationship with my father or mother. All I know is that what I image internally seems to bring up a corresponding set of feelings and responses which in concert (image, feeling, and response) form a relationship. That is, the evoked image of "parent" (object) brings with it an evoked set of feelings and responses, which is "me" or "child" (ego).

Now I find that I have different "parts" (representations of myself as "ego," and of significant other people as "object") inside of me which seem to be active reflections of ways I related to significant people in my life—those who impacted me—and who I "took in" or internalized according to my own proclivities, tendencies, and inclinations. At one moment I may be admonishing or praising myself or someone else (the activated object inside of me), and in the next moment I may be sitting in the experience of *being* admonished or praised (the activated "me" or ego part). I can easily float or switch between a child part or a parent part—an ego or an object—depending upon the situation. Such egos and objects, and their relationships, form the very fabric of the human personality.

With this brief understanding of the nature of object relations in mind, let us begin an exploration of childhood wounding, the splitting phenomenon, and the development of object relations. Again, understanding these concepts and their relationship to each other will help us understand their influence in the development of subpersonalities.

## A PSYCHOANALYTIC VIEW OF SPLITTING

All object relations theory acknowledges the phenomenon of splitting as one of its main centerpieces. It is important to understand the basic ideas of this psychological event, because it sets the stage for, and is seen as the fundamental pathway to, object relations formations and the ultimate development of subpersonalities.

A child is psychologically equipped with an ability to protect his basic integrity by splitting up contradictory experiences into discrete sectors and categories which can not otherwise be held together. Object relations theorists understand this principle



and typically refer to this as the splitting up of positive and negative, good and bad, experiences in the child.

The child has a series of experiences with a primary caregiver which can loosely be called positive experiences and negative experiences. These experiences, which psychoanalysts Robert Stolorow and George Atwood call "affect states" or "affective experiences" (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992, p. 31), are internalized and become part of the child's dynamic interactions with "mother" ("mother" is intended as a generic term for whomever the caregiver happens to be). Remember, however, that what Stolorow and Atwood are calling an affective experience for the child is in reality a *relational* experience between the child and his caregiver, as stated in the previous section. Affective experiences that become internalized by the child are, in fact, affective *relationship* experiences. This means that the child inwardly represents a portion of himself and a portion of his experience of "mother," and that these aspects together (child and mother) become part of the child's ongoing interactions with others.

Splitting occurs when a child repeatedly receives minimal or non-attuned responses from his caregiver. These "failed" affective relational experiences become split off from the daily, dynamic interplay between the child and "mother" and are repressed or walled off in the unconscious.

The internalization of affective relational experiences and subsequent splitting and repression occurs, partly because the child has not yet developed a sophisticated ego-system or "sense of self" (Stern, 1985) capable of holding conflicting or ambivalent sets of experiences together in some conscious, unifying fashion. Splitting and repression also occur, however, because the child soon learns to perceive certain experiences as unwelcome or even threatening to the caregiver. These negative experiences are necessarily banished into the unconscious "because of their association with emotional conflict and subjective danger" and because the appropriate validating responses from "mother" are absent (Stolorow, 1992, p. 30).

It is as though the child holds the potential to articulate a wide variety of affective experiences with others. Only those experiences, however, which gain the appropriate recognition and acceptance within the environment and from caregivers, are retained in consciousness. Affective relational experiences

which are shared, welcomed, and encouraged by caregivers are more readily accessed and called forth by the child. These validated relational experiences become part of the child's conscious personality through which he continues to mold his affect to the acceptable "affect" of his surroundings.

The unwelcome experiences, on the other hand, are split off and relegated to the unconscious where they remain a part of the child's internal world of repressed, unresolved woundings from childhood. And far from obliterated, they constitute active semi-autonomous object relations capable of personality influence and expression in spite of the child's efforts at presenting more acceptable behaviors.

We can now see two important and interrelated aspects of the splitting phenomenon. One is that psychological wounding seems to be connected to psychological splitting because the wounding results from the child's invalidated and denied experiences with caregivers. Depending upon the intensity and frequency of these wounding experiences, a child may sacrifice whole portions of his experiences with "mother" in order to maintain her caring. He can no longer afford or endure the possibility of re-wounding himself by risking a further "bad" or negative experience with "mother." Early wounding is part of the splitting phenomenon.

The second aspect worth noting is that something akin to a "survival or adaptive personality" emerges in the child which takes on the task of managing and ordering the myriad of daily events, thereby maintaining a needed sense of safety for the child. The internal requirement of the child is for a "stabilizing structure against the fragmenting potential of stimulation and affect" (Stern, 1985, p. 242). The child will do this in such a way that insures an increasingly specific attunement to his caregiving environment and to the management of his split-off and repressed experiences with his caregivers. In the words of W. R. D. Fairbairn, a principal theorist from the British school of object relations, the child takes on the task of managing the dynamic of splitting in order to minimize chaos "and thus to make his environment more tolerable" (Fairbairn, 1986, p. 164).

Fairbairn calls this managing capability of the child, the "central ego." It "sits on," so to speak, a wealth of repressed, unrec-  
onciled experiences which are unacceptable in the child's envi-

ronment and to the child's sense of safety. This central ego, comparable to D. W. Winnicott's "false self" (Winnicott, 1987), Rowan's "main executive" subpersonality (Op. cit., p. 131), or the **survival personality** in psychosynthesis (Firman & Russell, 1994), constitutes a major personality formation with which the individual most often identifies.

We can now see that the phenomenon of splitting underpins the formation of object relations. Here is object-relations theorist Thomas Ogden:

The infant must be able to split in order to feed safely without the intrusion of the anxiety that he is harming his mother, and without the anxiety that she will harm him. It is necessary for an infant to feel that the mother who is taking care of him is fully loving and has no connection whatever with the mother who "hurts" him by making him wait. (Ogden, 1990, p. 54)

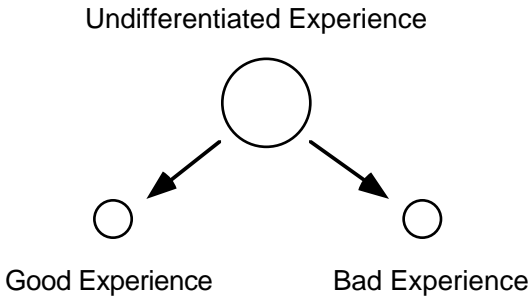
Splitting up internalized experiences into positive and negative categories seems to be a common feature of human development, occurring in all of us in various forms. And for some theorists this process and its ensuing object relations are a natural aspect of a child's early growth and development.

Dysfunction and pathology occur when a child receives non-attuned responses from the caregiver which are overwhelming and in conflict with his needs and validating requirements, and when little or no effort is made to repair or resolve the conflicts. Painful, contradictory experiences which lead to the splitting up of positive and negative experiences are not *inherently* pathological. They are, however, vulnerable to "pathological elaboration" (Stern, 1985).

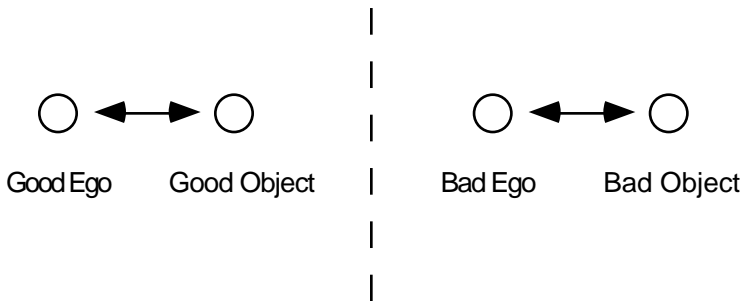
So while some theorists believe that the splitting phenomenon itself is not necessarily pathological, most seem to agree that the repeated and/or dramatic ineffectiveness and invalidation of the child-caregiver relational matrix is. As Stolorow and Atwood phrase it, "Pain is not pathology. It is the absence of adequate attunement and responsiveness to the child's painful emotional reactions that renders them unendurable and thus a source of traumatic states and psychopathology" (Op. cit., p. 54).

The traditional view of splitting and ego-object formation, then, looks something like this:

1. An infant begins her life with undifferentiated experience which is subsequently broken up into good experiences and bad experiences.



2. These good and bad experiences are split off from the infant's ongoing interactions with caregivers, and repressed in the infant's unconscious to form object relations:



3. Ultimately these object relations reemerge, re-index, or come together (synthesize) in the following way, implying a healthy reintegration of ambivalent experiences:



Child psychiatrist and researcher, Daniel Stern (Op. cit.) takes exception to this scheme, based on evidence that an infant has a clearly differentiated sense of self from the beginning of life. He also believes that the ability to discern "good" and "bad" experiences occurs later than object relations theorists maintain, stating that this actually does not occur until the infant's capacity for language and symbolization is developing. While I tend to agree with Stern on these points, I also believe that a total merger of good and bad in the same object or ego seldom occurs and rarely becomes fully integrated within the context of an individual's psychological development. It would seem that such a complete synthesis remains an illusive, ideal state for many who are the unfortunate recipients of their caregiver's own broken and unresolved ego-object relations. Finally, as Rowan (1980), Firman (1994), and others point out, wounding and splitting may well take place as early as life in utero.

Level 2 in the above scheme is where many people appear to struggle today. These are the "ordinary people" Assagioli referred to who cannot manage ambivalent and contradictory experiences without being thrown from one side ("I am good") to the other ("I am bad"). Human beings are in many respects psychological extremists, and there is far more shifting back and forth between positive and negative aspects of the personality than most of us care to admit.

We have only to look at our collective tendency to project this "tragic" split onto those we revere and venerate as important people and glamorous stars. We will idealize a celebrity only as long as he or she lives up to our demands for perfection and goodness. One publicized mistake, so readily accomplished through the media, and we banish them to the status of a bad child (bad ego) while we take on the collective world view of a punitive, judging society (bad object).

Many individuals maintain this positive/negative, good/bad split, and perform well and manage their lives adequately. They have simply incorporated their woundings and "tragic contrasts" into a larger, equally wounded society in ways which reflect and comply with the constraints and conditions of the environment.

To reiterate, there is disagreement among theorists as to how and when splitting occurs, and whether or not the complete re-integration of contrasting attributes in the same ego or object is

a resulting feature of this process. What they share in common, however, is a set of assumptions: 1) that the arena for psychological study and investigation is the relational environment and matrix rather than the isolated individual; 2) that pathology is born out of wounding from unrepaired and unresolved misattunements from caregivers within the relational matrix; and 3) that motivation and drive are based on a preeminent “thrust toward the establishment and maintenance of relations with others” (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, p. 220).

Many theorists seem in agreement that childhood wounding, and the resulting splitting and object formations, are a result of “absent or inadequate affect attunement” and invalidating experiences within an unresponsive matrix. The trauma can be immediate, overwhelming and unmistakable, or it can be hidden and cumulative over a long period of time.

Having seen how object relations are formed, let us now look at the specific interplay of object relations as understood within psychoanalysis.

## PSYCHOANALYTIC OBJECT RELATIONS

The tendency to split up good and bad, positive and negative, experiences is an affective relational experience, always involving the child’s view of an object and a portion of the child’s ego which stands in relationship to this object. In concert, they (ego and object) are what is termed an object relationship. We can begin our discussion of the dynamics involved in these early ego-object formations with an outline and critique of Thomas Ogden’s (Op. cit.) current understanding.

As Ogden points out, there first arises an object relationship based on several working models of mother which feature empathic failures in the caregiving matrix. We will call this a “negative object relationship.” Ogden believes that this relationship (which he terms “self-component/bad object-component”) comes equipped with an almost invariant set of dynamics. He characterizes these dynamics in the following way:

1. The negative ego in the relationship constantly pressures the negative object to change

into an positive object, while the negative object, with the same intensity, resists change. Both ego and object need each other for object-relatedness.

2. All forms of change that disturb or threaten the existing dynamics are viewed as threats of extinction to either component in the relationship. The negative object views "change" as loss of identity. The negative ego will not abort the relationship for fear of abandonment.

3. The negative object maintains relationship to the negative ego through controlling mechanisms such as guilt, threat, shaming, taunting, and dominating.

4. Any signs of diminished dependence from the negative ego towards the negative object can induce feelings of envy and jealousy on the part of the object who fears being left behind.

These dynamics described by Ogden give us an excellent beginning look within object relationships, but they leave out a crucial factor. While he ascribes a broad spectrum of activity and behavior to a negatively-paired ego and object, he omits any mention of a *positively-paired* ego and object. It seems more plausible to assume that certain of these dynamics may occur as a result of the interplay between this negatively paired relationship and its positively paired counterpart, the *positive object relationship*. In view of his omission, the dynamics Ogden describes seem incomplete and not altogether accurate.

To complete the matrix we need to formulate an object relationship based on a positive ego-object dyad as well. It can be inferred that if there is an object relationship constructed from several working models of negative experiences with mother, there is also an object relationship constructed from several working models of positive experiences with mother, and that both the positive and negative object relationships are interactive and dynamic.

Along these same lines, Ogden's suggestion that the ego-component in a negatively conditioned object relationship constantly pressures the bad object to change into a good object requires careful attention. It is my view that the negative ego is conditioned, by virtue of its relationship with the negative object, to maintain a negative self-image and to assume the brunt of the onslaught of controlling behavior evoked from the object. The stance of the negative ego is one that absorbs the punishment and does not question or plead with the object to mollify or change its controlling posture as Ogden implies. Simply put, the ego-component believes it is bad. As Greenberg and Mitchell state in their review of Fairbairn's theory of psychopathology, "If the parent offers only painful, unfulfilling contacts, the child does not abandon the parent to search for more pleasurable opportunities. The child needs the parent, so he integrates his relations with him on a suffering, masochistic basis" (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, p. 173).

We shall begin to look at the source of this "pressure to change" as we discuss the development of subpersonalities. For now, let us assume that negatively conditioned object relations are limited to negative interactions, and that positively conditioned object relations are limited to positive interactions. There is little mixing of these energies, which is to say that negative object relations do not exhibit positive tendencies, and vice versa. Instead, they arise out of discrete, pure categories of positive and negative experiences—the splitting phenomena we have already discussed. Given this, we can infer that positive and negative object relations will interact with each other, but only for the purpose of safeguarding their respective positions.

We can now see that the child is faced with two fluctuating sets of internal experiences which comprise a negative object relationship and a positive object relationship. The child will experience these relationships through intense identification with components in either relationship. At this point we can describe at least three general principles governing object relationships, whether positive or negative.



## **First Principle**

Any perceived impingement upon the basic structure of a positive or negative object relationship is viewed by each component within the relationship as a threat. The object resists change for fear of loss of identity; the ego will not abort or leave the relationship for fear of abandonment.

This principle was strikingly exemplified by a client who shamefully admitted (negative ego) that he saw no evidence that the assaulting part (negative object) he was attempting to dialogue with was wrong in its criticisms and judgment. He went on to say that he would be frightened to lose such a controlling part, that the relationship was long-standing and had structure to it. He depended upon this self-criticism, for he felt he would not be responsible without it. As he considered breaking this profound relationship, he described his feelings as loss and abandonment.

A second client often comes to therapy captivated by a positive view of herself (positive ego). She is without problems, feeling great and wondering why she is continuing with therapy. She would prefer using therapy for crisis intervention rather than for ongoing self-exploration. Her highs are seductive and capable of obliterating immediate awareness of her ongoing bouts of depression and abandonment. She becomes entrenched in the positive sector, is highly sensitive to any suggestion that she might be avoiding other, less desirable feelings, and is threatened by any perceived destabilizing input from her therapist (projected negative object).

## **Second Principle**

Components of an object relationship in one sector (either positive or negative) will react defensively against any “outside” effort or attempt to cause a shift from that sector to another. The attempt will be perceived as a threat.

A long-term client who has fluctuated between anger and depression much of his adult life could not entertain the possibility that he was basically a good child growing up who had been subjected to a non-accepting, non-empathic, controlling environment. Any efforts at surfacing a positive sense of self (positive ego) brought up an onslaught of punitive and sarcastic reactions (negative object).

A second client can only briefly maintain congruency with negative events from his past. Soon he will insist that his life is now wonderful. This individual identifies heavily with components of an object relationship in the positive sector in order to idealize his experiences and to safeguard a separation from negative feelings which he views as threatening. Delving into the negative sector for him will typically bring about an overabundance of responses aimed at reframing bad memories into good ones: “They never wanted to hurt me. I knew they loved me even when they left me for months at a time,” or, “My week was really painful for me but that was great because I learned so much.”

## **Third Principle**

Maintaining an identification within a positive or negative object relationship means satisfying the dynamics of that relationship. Not satisfying the dynamics can result in an involuntary, unconscious shift in identification and quality of relatedness.

A client places enormous pressure on himself to maintain a daily work schedule that is formidable. He sails through his day, switching from meetings, to grant reviews, to grading student papers, and ending a twelve-hour day with a two-hour exercise workout. He feels pleased with himself and proud of his accomplishments (positive ego)—he has been satisfying the dynamics of a positive object relationship. But when he arrives home at nine o'clock in the evening and is too tired to sort through all of his mail, he begins to criticize and push himself to keep going (negative object). Finally he goes to bed, feeling himself a failure (negative ego). Having failed to maintain the positive object relationship, he has been taken over by the negative object relationship.

A second client, recently separated from a painful, long-term relationship, became outraged at herself in therapy for participating in this abusive relationship for so many years (negative object). At her next session, she shyly reported that when her ex-partner called her a few days later and sounded so cordial over the phone, she suddenly found herself happily engaging with him, trying to please him and ending the conversation with an invitation to get together for dinner (positive ego). Failing to maintain the dynamics of the negative object relationship, she has shifted from the negative to the positive object relationship.

Having explored the nature of object relations, and their formation in the wounding and splitting of childhood, we are in a position to examine a psychosynthesis object relations theory. As we shall see, a psychosynthesis approach here does not demand we leave behind the insights from psychoanalytic theory, but rather casts these insights within a larger context.

## A PSYCHOSYNTHESIS VIEW OF SPLITTING

In the evolution of contemporary psychosynthesis, Firman's (Firman & Russell, 1994) current thinking offers a transpersonal depth and dimension to the prevailing wealth of object relations theory. A summary of some of his work is important here because it comprises the beginnings of a psychosynthesis object relations theory from which subpersonality formation and development can be better understood.

The core of Firman's work gives primacy to the **personal self/Higher Self** relationship, known also as the **I-Self relationship**. The theory posits that the phenomenon of splitting and all ensuing object relationships are the result of wounding to this fundamental I-Self relationship which, in psychosynthesis, is the core of human being-ness.

This wounding occurs within the early relational environment of childhood at a time when the caregiver operates as the principle **external unifying center** (Assagioli, 1965), that is, as the reflection, symbol, or conduit for the child's own I-Self connection. In Assagioli's words, "The latter [the external unifying center] thus becomes an indirect but true link, a point of connection between the personal man [in this case, the child] and his higher Self, which is reflected and symbolized in that object" (Ibid., p. 25).

In object relations theory, the external unifying center is equivalent to the external object, caregiver, "mother," etc. Carrying this one step further, Firman states that the introjected or internalized object is the **internal unifying center**.

Since, according to Assagioli (Ibid.), "I" is a reflection or projection of Self, the existence of "I" for the child flows directly from Self via these external unifying centers. Therefore any empathic failure or serious invalidation from "mother," who is acting as the child's external unifying center, amounts to a disturbance in the child's I-Self connection, thereby posing the threat of *nonbeing*.

These environmental/caregiving failures lead to what Firman calls the **primordial wound**, and they are responsible for the subsequent splitting of the personality into positive and negative sectors indicated in psychoanalytic object relations theory. Here are some of Firman's thoughts:

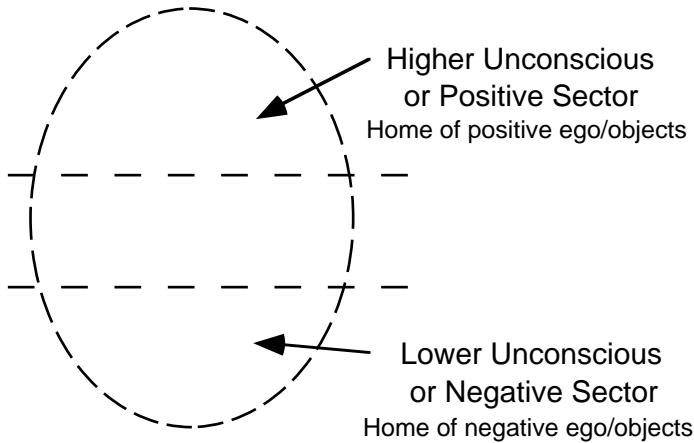
...the I-Self relationship is reflected in both the positive and negative sectors created by the primal split: the ego positions dimly reflect "I" and the [internal] unifying center (object) positions dimly reflect Self... It is as if our essential I-Self connection, our basic experience of being, is reflected in two parts of a broken mirror. The trauma of nonbeing disrupts our continuity of being, not by actually breaking the connection between "I" and Self—for that would mean true non-relationship and nonbeing—but by causing the individual to create split-off experiences of negative being and positive being. In this way, relationship and being are maintained in the face of trauma. (Firman, 1993b, p. 118)

...this nonbeing wounding is a disturbance in the I-Self relationship as experienced via the parent acting as the "external unifying center." Since "I" is a reflection of Self, the sense of I-amness comes ultimately from Self, but is channeled by the external unifying center [external object], and then by the "internal unifying center" or internalized object. (Firman, 1993a)

Thus, the I-Self relationship is the *essential* object relationship, imperfectly realized in all of our imperfect object relations; it is distinct but not separate from all object relations, formed by them (in immanence) yet transcendent of them. (Ibid.)

Firman posits that this primal positive-negative splitting of experiences in the child actually creates positive and negative sectors of the unconscious, which in psychosynthesis theory constitute the **higher unconscious** and **lower unconscious** (Assagioli, 1965).

These positive and negative sectors of object relationships can be illustrated following Assagioli's familiar oval-shaped diagram:



The higher unconscious or positive sector holds those ideal ego and object positions which are characterized by transpersonal qualities such as joy, beauty, inspiration, wonder, and the like. These represent an idealized I-Self relationship, a split-off “higher realm,” often experienced as fleeting, fragile, and rare compared to the rigors and realities of daily living.

The lower unconscious or negative sector holds a different set of object relations that are disturbing, difficult, and in Assagioli’s words, “sometimes surprising, baffling or even frightening” (1965, p. 75). Because of wounding, this sector functions as a negative I-Self relationship and is characterized by experiences such as shame, hopelessness, and rage—energies directly associated with the disturbed early environment.

Both higher and lower unconscious, however, derive from “annihilating” (Winnicott, 1987), intolerable experiences caused by the violation of one’s sense of containment and safety from caregivers—the nonbeing wound. If a child cannot hold contradictory experiences from the environment in any coherent fashion, then portions of both positive and negative experiences must be walled off in the unconscious in order for the child to engage those remaining experiences which are least threatening and most easily managed. The child, then, is faced with the awesome task of warding off nonbeing trauma and “finding him-

self" in the midst of competing and collusive internal relationships from both sectors of the unconscious. Depending on a number of psychological variants, he may become dualistic in his development by favoring one sector, together with its corresponding object relations, over the other. By identifying with either the positive or negative sector, he attempts to separate himself from the deeper nonbeing wounding inherent in the split between the sectors.

An example of strong identification conditioned by the higher unconscious might be the highly idealistic individual who acknowledges only the positive in her life. Such a person might attempt to distance herself from the intrusion of negative thoughts and images by constantly reframing difficult experiences from the past and present into positive ones.

Mary often comes to therapy in a high state—excited, happy, exuding positive energy. She typically describes her week as "great," or, "A lot has happened—but it's all good," or, "So much is going on and I'm so tired, but it's really great. Things are really great." As she begins to quiet down and focus on her internal world, deep anxiety often surfaces around early memories of sexual abuse and a dreadful sense of vulnerability and lack of safety. She has developed a strong identification with object relationships in the higher unconscious, partly as an escape from her abusive past.

In contrast to the above example, a strong identification conditioned by the lower unconscious is reflected in individuals who are chronically depressed and/or for whom even the brightest moments and events are consistently framed with negativity, doubt, cynicism, and anger.

Fred exemplifies entrenched resignation and a strong identification with the negative sector. His life is difficult and his issues of poor self-esteem and self loathing seem endless and unabated. Rare moments of disidentification from

the tragedy of his life and acknowledgments of personal deeds or accomplishments bring up deep feelings of sadness and loss and the terrible sense of parental abandonment he experienced as a child. Fred is strongly identified with object relationships in the lower unconscious and tenaciously holds onto a well-developed negative self-image in order to ward off the deeper, more traumatic experiences of abandonment and loss in his life.

These two examples of intense identification with object relationships in each sector point to the powerful effects of childhood wounding and the numerous ways individuals will adapt and “customize” themselves in order to survive.

According to Firman then, the positive and negative sectors indicated in object relations theory are but the shadows of a deeper and higher reality—the higher and lower unconscious so well-known in psychosynthesis theory and practice. Firman has hereby created a fundamental bridge between contemporary psychoanalysis and psychosynthesis, and opened the way for much creative research.

So far, we have reviewed the splitting phenomenon and the formation of object relations from a contemporary psychoanalytic standpoint, and have described some basic object relations principles which are aimed at safeguarding the integrity of the personality. We have also explored Firman’s current psychosynthesis thinking as he attempts to add transpersonal dimension and depth to object relations theory. It is now time to explore how psychosynthesis embraces the interplay of object relations, in order to understand the many ways subpersonalities are formed.

## **PSYCHOSYNTHESIS OBJECT RELATIONS**

Object relations result from some of the earliest conditioning in the infant or child. Problematic object relations derive from the personal woundings from inadequate caregiving coupled with the child’s inability to hold conflict and contradictory experi-



ences in some coherent, ongoing way. Object relationships are adaptive, interactive states which tend to house themselves in positive and negative (higher and lower) sectors of the unconscious.

Positive and negative object relationships are seldom held in balance in a person's psyche. An individual who has been heavily traumatized or whose perceptual reality and validating experiences with others have been constantly usurped, can become heavily weighted in either the positive or negative sector. He or she may become endlessly mired in an existential self-deprecating life, or, through idealization, repeatedly dissociate from the practical aspects and vicissitudes of daily living.

Psychological health hinges on a multitude of early and ongoing variables such as: the quality of a child's caregiving environment; the psychological makeup of her caregivers; her own overall constitution, affective nature, and level of vitality; and her continuing search for additional external models (external unifying centers) to incorporate as monitoring, regulating, or enhancing objects.

Out of these variables form a multitude of intrapersonal and interpersonal responses to life which border on the infinite. Individuals are capable of generating a vast array of responses and reactions, ranging from destructive to healthy, for the purpose of safeguarding themselves from some perceived threat and for maintaining some semblance of stability in their lives.

As we discuss some of the possible interactions between contiguous pairs of positive and negative object relationships, and begin to speculate on the more complex development of subpersonalities, it will be important to keep this uniqueness and diversity in mind. We may all split up our early experiences in some fundamental and predictable ways, but the impact of this phenomenon and its manifestations in our inner and outer worlds will differ for every individual; the impact of childhood wounding can set up a system of organizing principles called object relationships, but the individual will engage these object relationships, and their "subpersonality" expressions, in an infinite number of unique ways.

With this understanding, we can now describe some of the potential interactions characteristic of object relations in both the lower unconscious and the higher unconscious.

### Interactions within the Lower Unconscious

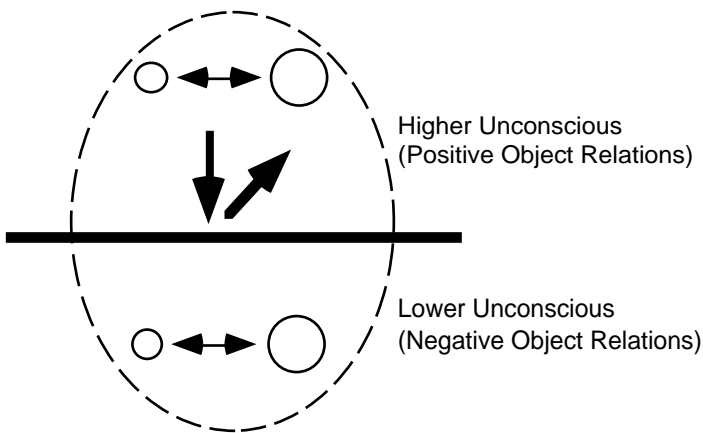
Negative object relationships are fashioned from devaluing attitudes and actions which support an exaggerated sense of self and world.

**Interaction 1** The ego in a negative object relationship is conditioned to complement the object's negative stance. Examples include feelings of shame, guilt, depression, low self-esteem, panic, and anxiety.

**Interaction 2** The negative object acts upon the negative ego through conditional and controlling stances such as jealousy, guilt, threat, shaming, taunting, raging, and domination.

Negatively conditioned egos and objects can form a hostile integration and even fusion in the personality that is a strong weapon for destructive behavior, and an effective way of warding off intrusion from object relations in the higher unconscious.

This fusion within the negative sector, and its defensive stance against the positive sector, is represented in the following diagram. Note the heavier arrows indicating energy which might attempt to impinge on the lower unconscious from the higher unconscious.



The dark horizontal line in the diagram represents the “repression barrier” of psychoanalytic theory, preventing higher unconscious material from leaving its own domain. This fusion in the negative sector thereby constitutes an aspect of what psychologist and psychosynthesis theorist Frank Haronian (1972) has called, “the repression of the sublime.”

In such cases the individual is heavily identified with maintaining a negatively fused self-image at any cost. This is exemplified on one hand by the negative ego, with such major subpersonality expressions as the Bad Child, the Loser, the Delinquent, the Incompetent, the Orphan, and the Scared Rabbit. On the other hand, major expressions of the negative object might include the Narcissist, the Power Monger, the Sergeant at Arms, the Ruthless Leader, the Critical Parent, the Raging Beast, and the Witch.

### **Interactions within the Higher Unconscious**

Positive object relationships are fashioned from idealized attitudes and actions which support an exaggerated sense of self and world.

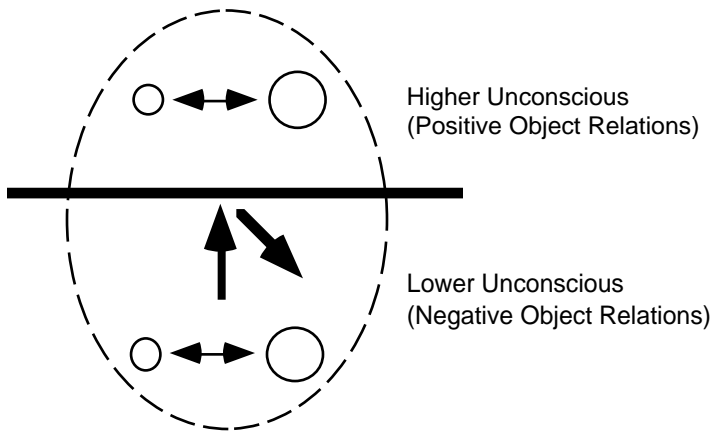
**Interaction 1** The ego in the positive object relationship is conditioned to complement the object’s positive stance. Examples include feeling adored, basking in the glow of the “other,” and feeling completely loved and cared for. The positive ego feels itself to be “anointed” and “saved.”

**Interaction 2** The positive object acts upon the positive ego by offering unconditional approval, caring, praise and validation. The positive object feels itself as all-knowing, wise, sacred, godly, and pristine.

Positively conditioned egos and objects can, together, form an idealized integration or fusion as a way of building a strong defence against, and eliminating intrusion from, object relations in the negative sector. Thus the split between the higher and lower unconscious is maintained.

In these cases the individual is heavily identified with maintaining a positively fused self-image at all costs. This is exemplified via the positive ego by such major subpersonality expressions as the Good Child, the Devoted Aspirant, the Adored One, the Princess, the Hero, and the Gold Medalist. Major subpersonality expressions for the positive object include the Guru, the Saint, the Holy One, the Good Mother, the All Provider, and the Omnipotent Leader.

This defensive fusion within the positive sector may be diagrammed:



Again note the repression barrier (horizontal line), this time formed by a fusion of positive object relations defending against impingement of energy from the lower unconscious. It may well be that the repression of the positive and the repression of the negative are but two sides of the same coin—the primal wound.

These examples of interactions within the higher and lower unconscious suggest various degrees of entrenchment. Both positive and negative sectors are inflated to some degree because they represent unresolved abuse and neglect in the person's life which has led to a splitting and repression of unmanageable experiences. Together, the higher and lower unconscious represent valid aspects of our experience which have been split off following early wounding. The more intensely exaggerated an object relationship is, the more trauma it may be attempting to mask, and the more it will strive to remain sepa-

rated from object relations in the opposing sector. Healing occurs not by favoring positive over negative, or the higher unconscious over the lower, but through a careful recognition, acceptance, and management of the components of *both* realms of the unconscious through the inclusive action of "I."

A fundamental form of object relations thus seems to be a fusion of paired egos and objects in either sector which creates a separation from, and exclusion of, ego-object intrusion from the opposite sector. In other words, a negative object relationship will view a positive object relationship as antithetical to its negative identity, and a positive object relationship will view a negative object relationship as antithetical to its positive identity.

Now that we have reviewed splitting and object relations within both a psychoanalytic and psychosynthesis context, we can turn our attention to the specifics of subpersonality formation. As we shall see, this deeply conditioned substratum of object relations forms the foundation for future subpersonality development.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUBPERSONALITIES

Out of the multiplicity of object relations and interactions within and between the higher and lower unconscious come the subpersonality structures in formative, and then more complex, stages of development.

In the purest and simplest forms, one would find subpersonalities which directly reflect the ego-object dyad characteristic of each sector of the unconscious. Each ego-object subpersonality would dwell within a self-consistent, harmonious state—whether positive or negative. In such a pristine environment, there would be no threat of nonbeing nor any motivation to change.

From the higher unconscious, absolute subpersonalities such as the Anointed One (positive ego) and the Guru (positive object), might emerge. This pairing suggests the potential for exaggerated idealization which in its strictest sense is irrefutable and static. The two components exist as perfect complementary reflections of each other, in undisturbed union. The Anointed One would be completely sold on its own "salvation" and the Guru would have no misgivings regarding its status as "God."

On the other hand, pure subpersonalities from the lower unconscious such as the Bad Seed (negative ego) and the Ultimate Judge (negative object) might develop the same irreproachable, static relationship. They too are separate from even a shadow of deeper, nonbeing feelings (as is the positive dyad) or a sense of “something better”—input from the higher unconscious. The Bad Seed would be absolutely convinced of its own “damnation” and the Ultimate Judge would be unreservedly damning.

As seen in the three principles of object relationships listed above, any threatened disturbance in the pure union of either positive or negative dyad will reveal the underlying wound of nonbeing—fears of abandonment, loss of identity, and the like. Each component in each dyad forms a strong fusion with the other, reflecting the larger split in the personality caused by nonbeing wounding.

The tension among these pure object relationships can be extremely powerful, especially in childhood, and so these pure subpersonality types may become buried or ameliorated over the course of time. But even the adult can still feel the pushes and pulls from these positive and negative sectors: within a short span of time we can experience ourselves shifting between a critical, judgmental stance (negative object), to one of shame and guilt (negative ego); this can be replaced by a congratulatory sense of worth as we reaffirm the “absolute rightness” of our original position (positive object), ending with a perfect and glowing sense of self (positive ego). It is easy to imagine how such dynamics might be overwhelming to a child, and so demand a less chaotic and more manageable way to handle them. This is precisely why the more common complex subpersonalities are formed—they are ways of maintaining some stable sense of identity amongst these powerful relational tensions.

Thus from these higher and lower object relations come the subpersonalities familiar to most of us, who are pleasing, co-dependent, anxious, driven, compliant, controlling and sullen, and who cause so many personality shifts and abrupt changes in our awareness. Individuals who are accustomed to self-reflection and personal psychological investigation find many more subpersonality types than the pure forms mentioned above. Furthermore, no two people seem to have precisely the same

subpersonalities, either in degree or in kind. It is my opinion that even in postulating a fundamental positive and negative pairing of object relations, the particular way in which the individual responds to these will nevertheless build a unique family of subpersonalities which looks and feels much less discrete and clear than our theoretical view. Each person will give meaning to experiences in a multitude of ways, and there seem to be no absolute or inevitable forms or shapes that subpersonalities will take as a result of these experiences.

Again, the strong tensions held among the positive and negative object relationships are not usually engaged directly; rather, more complex, stable, and unique subpersonality formations are developed to manage these tensions. These more complex forms are also conditioned in an ongoing way, as the individual's "natural assets" (Stern) continue to mix and merge with the environment, and as there develop patterns of relationships among the subpersonalities themselves. The following is a case review and discussion of one such stable, complex subpersonality called the "Anxious Pleaser."

### THE ANXIOUS PLEASER

P. entered therapy during a period of intense difficulties in his marriage. He was about to separate from his second wife and was also involved with another woman. As therapy unfolded, P. disclosed that his marriage had become chaotic and painful for him after the first year. He felt ashamed and responsible for this and had become increasingly depressed and cut off from feeling good about himself.

P. was the older of two siblings. He was unable to recall much of his early childhood years, but gradually a history unfolded which included a mother who demanded absolute accountability from her husband and who used anger and rage to assert her control and get her way. His father was a placater who acquiesced to her demands and maintained emotional distance.

P. could not recall having been the recipient of his mother's wrath (which the therapist suspected was a repression of numerous intolerable experiences with mother). He could, however, vividly recall detailed features in her face as she wildly

struck out against her husband verbally—the sneer, the frightening eyes, her shrill voice, etc. He learned quickly how to avoid this aspect of his mother through performance and achievement, evoking the adoring side of her and thus creating safety for himself.

Evenings and weekends as a teenager were spent in a variety of after-school and part-time jobs, in order to supplement the family income. P. was a natural athlete and a good student. During high school he was elected president of his class and captain of the school soccer team. In his mother's eyes, however, his perfect record was flawed by an episode of participating in a fight against students from a rival high-school. The news filtered back to his mother who accused him of marring the family name. He described it as a shameful, confusing episode.

P. single-handedly carried the banner for his family. By the end of high school he had elected, with no prompting from his parents, to prepare for a career in medicine. During his premed years he married his high-school sweetheart whom his parents adored. After that it was a series of endless conflicts between his quest for perfection, pleasing, adoration and love, and his more fractured and invalidated needs for self-expression, self-assertion, personal identity, and autonomy.

P. had an affair during his marriage and soon divorced his wife. From there his list of achievements and failures sounded like an epic. He entered into a stormy second marriage; was hospitalized twice for pancreatic problems; became addicted to alcohol and prescription drugs; went through a recovery program; had another affair; made large amounts of money; lost large amounts of money; bailed his parents out of financial difficulty; sprained ligaments playing soccer; and repeated often in therapy that as soon as the current crisis that loomed up in front of him was resolved, he would slow down and take time for himself.

## **In Therapy**

P. is an excellent example of an Anxious Pleaser. In therapy he sits on the edge of his chair, eagerly interacting with the therapist, but during the week he forgets many of the insights



which occurred to him. He is so intent on pleasing the therapist that his work in therapy often does not produce change, and the next session may be like starting over again.

P. engages in any number of interactions which show that his Anxious Pleaser subpersonality is managing both positive and negative object relationships—those deeper “pure” subpersonalities mentioned above. For example, P’s pure Good Child (positive ego) may compliment the projected pure Good Parent’s unconditional stance (in this case, the therapist becomes the positive object): “You’re so clear when you explain these things to me.” Or he will come into therapy influenced by an Omnipotent One (positive object), completely in control of his life: “I’ve had a sensational week. I have nothing to report.”

On the other hand, the pure Bad Parent (negative object) may be projected onto the therapist, and his Bad Child position (negative ego) will feel ashamed and guilty for having forgotten the insights from the previous session: “I’m sorry I didn’t learn this very well. I hope you’re not angry about repeating all this to me.” Occasionally the pure Bad Parent subpersonality (negative object) can also be heard in P’s own angry self-criticism: “I’m stupid. I’m not learning anything. I’m not changing. I just can’t seem to get it right.”

But overall, therapy is a way for P. to achieve—one more thing he can try very hard to do—in order to feel good about himself and to absolve himself from a history of perceived mistakes and failures. This overriding motivation comes from the Anxious Pleaser, which moves among and manages the various positive and negative object relation positions, never becoming totally captured by any one of them. Throughout, the Anxious Pleaser can be seen managing an aspect of the larger split between higher and lower unconscious, and so avoiding the underlying threat of nonbeing.

Through the years, P’s Anxious Pleaser subpersonality has developed into an important vehicle for expression in the world. In fact, at times it appears as if the Anxious Pleaser is identical to his entire conscious personality. If this were indeed the case, the Anxious Pleaser might be considered a more primary personality structure than a subpersonality, similar to Rowan’s “Main Executive” subpersonality, Fairbairn’s “Central Ego,” or in psychosynthesis, Firman and Russell’s **survival personality** (Firman, 1994).

Over the course of P's therapy, the fundamental healing has not been a function of specific techniques, but of the empathic resonance or "intersubjective field" (Stolorow) between the therapist and him. As the therapist has maintained an empathic stance, remaining clear about the object relations dynamics emerging within this intersubjective field, P. has found the space to connect to the therapist beyond the various internal egos and objects.

This connection to the therapist as a new external unifying center has allowed some gains toward establishing an observer or witness (evoking "I") vis-à-vis the Anxious Pleaser subpersonality. P. has gradually been able to engage the underlying depression; uncover the phenomenological world of his early environment; and begun to hold meaningfully both the positive and negative in his life.

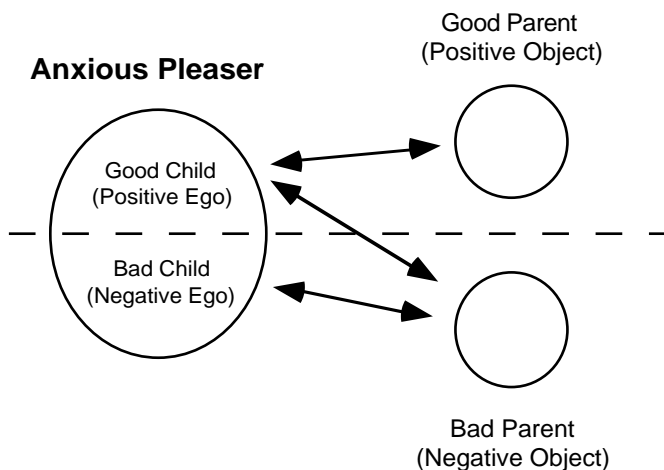
## Discussion

One can see many complex interactions at the core of the Anxious Pleaser subpersonality, all of which reflect the pervasive object-relations atmosphere of the larger personality.

A core dynamic is the pure Good Child subpersonality (positive ego) exhibiting a positive motivation, reflecting an idealized relationship with a nonthreatening Good Parent subpersonality (positive object). But concurrently, a pure Bad Child subpersonality (negative ego) is engaged in negative experiences (shame, guilt) which reflect a painful relationship with a threatening Bad Parent subpersonality.

This complicated and simultaneous interplay between positive and negative energies results in the birth of a subpersonality which combines aspects of both a positive and negative ego—one who is *both* good (positive ego) *and* bad (negative ego).

As these expressions of "good" and "bad" come together in the same subpersonality, an Anxious Pleaser subpersonality emerges, representing an elaborated version of the pure subpersonality expressions, Good Child and Bad Child. This might be diagrammed like this:



The Anxious Pleaser is driven to perfection and pleasing based on a need to maintain itself within the glow of the Good Parent's validating and caring stance. Pleasing and performing, as well as appearing happy, contented, and energetic, become translations of the Anxious Pleaser's need for unconditional positive regard, insuring a perfect, idealized, and irreproachable relationship with the environment.

The undercurrent of anxiety within this subpersonality is based on an intense need to avoid the shaming judgements of the Bad Parent. If the Anxious Pleaser were to succumb to this, the result would be an abrupt banishment to the tragic role of the Bad Child. The Anxious Pleaser must learn to engage the environment in a way that insures its ability to live successfully with, or to deny, the anxiety and fear that propel this subpersonality to heights of achievement. Its goal must be to remain perfectly compliant and "good" in response to a Bad Parent's demands for perfection. This insures, for the Anxious Pleaser, the possibility of evoking validating responses from the Good Parent—as learned by P. in relationship to his mother, see above.

The Anxious Pleaser is faced with the daunting task of: 1) avoiding assaults from the Bad Parent; 2) fending off sabotage from its "shadow" counterpart, the Bad Child; and 3) maintaining its good image and perfect record within the glow of the

Good Parent. Failure to accomplish this goal will plunge the Anxious Pleaser (and its relationship to an idealized, accepting Good Parent) into the realm of the wrong, guilty, ashamed Bad Child and the angry, abusive Bad Parent.

Here, the Anxious Pleaser is always in a tenuous position, always enmeshed with its own “shadow” part, the Bad Child, and ever working diligently to reassert itself over the Bad Child’s tendency—through self-defeating behaviors and feelings—to reestablish its relationship to a Bad Parent. The Anxious Pleaser attempts to behave in ways that insure its ongoing relationship with a Good Parent, whether that Good Parent is internal or projected.

In a child’s environment, this type of Anxious Pleaser subpersonality can develop out of a relationship with unpredictable caregivers and other family members with whom one must tread lightly, second guess, and anticipate in order to insure their loving and validating responses. Such caregivers act out their own inner demands for perfection and threats of banishment vis-à-vis their children, while at the same time implicitly offering a potential union of love which seems always to be outside the child’s reach. The child becomes caught in a hopeless quest for the validating, safe, unconditional “love object” through achievement, pleasing, and striving.

A caregiver can also display unconditional love in one moment and neglect and abuse in the next, with little regard for helping the child bridge these two disparate and conflicting sets of experiences. The child is left with no strategy for understanding the painful paradox, and will here too set up a series of behaviors aimed at avoiding the conflict and re-invoking the loving responses—the Anxious Pleaser.

In this brief case of the Anxious Pleaser, we can see how a subpersonality is a creative attempt to manage the stressful object relations within the early caregiving matrix. As stated earlier, a subpersonality is an embodiment of tension and conflict, and also, paradoxically, a drive for harmony and unity. It is a person’s best attempt to navigate potentially destructive interpersonal relationships at a particular phase of life. Subpersonalities can be thought of as early attempts at integration and synthesis within the psyche—psychosynthesis—as they strive to bring together conflicting relationships in the inner and outer worlds.

## IN CONCLUSION

There is a need for theorists and therapists to define more clearly both the causes of subpersonality formation and their ongoing development over time. We must ask ourselves if subpersonalities are natural formations which would occur under any circumstances, or if it is possible that even the healthiest appearing subpersonalities may have their roots in abuse and tension.

It seems to me that childhood wounding in its multitude of forms is ultimately responsible for subpersonality formation. There may be no such thing as a truly natural or non-traumatized subpersonality. All subpersonalities may be "tragic" in origin because all subpersonalities seem to form originally out of some amount of broken relationships with significant others. If this is true, and if it is true that we all hold variations of these unique subpersonality formations inside of us, then we are all to some degree wounded.

According to this view it is not that the lower-unconscious subpersonalities are the only ones wounded, while those conditioned by the higher unconscious are unwounded. Rather, subpersonalities conditioned by both the higher and lower unconscious constitute counter-variations on a theme of childhood wounding. Assuming that these two sectors of the unconscious and their respective subpersonalities are separate from each other only contributes to the ongoing split between lower unconscious and higher unconscious.

Similarly, the therapist who sees the higher unconscious subpersonalities as superior, and therefore more valuable than negatively-charged subpersonalities, may be unknowingly obstructing the client's healing as well. Only an approach which acknowledges that the split between higher and lower constitutes a wounding can facilitate the integration of the psyche, a healing of the primal split between the higher and lower—what has been called the "expansion of the middle unconscious" (Firman & Russell, 1993).

In a very real way then, subpersonalities in the higher unconscious need healing as much as subpersonalities in the lower unconscious. It should not be assumed that by virtue of their positive energy the higher-unconscious forms are no longer in

need of our assistance, direction, and understanding. By working with higher unconscious subpersonalities and teaching them to interact in our daily experience, we strengthen them and allow them to become infused with the overall wholeness which we—and our deeper **Self**—are attempting to bring about in our lives. Without this ongoing effort to build bridges between positive and negative “parts,” we may encounter potentially healing wise gurus, spirit guides, and gods and goddesses who have wise things to tell us, but who are otherwise impotent in their ability to impact those aspects of our personality which need their illuminating energies.

### **The Empathic Connection**

As we grasp the dynamics of positively and negatively charged subpersonalities, and their relationship to early object relations, our ability to connect to the client at these deeper levels increases; we become more able to appreciate and understand the depths to which a client may need to take her healing. At this level of inquiry, a therapist who offers empathic understanding and a direct relationship to the client’s profound encounters with early pain and loss will be creating the essential foundation for the therapeutic alliance and for the client’s eventual healing. This richer “feel” for the early family dynamics beneath subpersonality formation can allow a greater respect for the client’s needs for appropriate validation, “mirroring,” and attunement in the clinical setting.

The empathy which grows from understanding the deeper object-relations wounding of a client also allows a respectful honoring of the client’s right to determine the appropriate pace for facing and healing this wounding. Those subpersonalities which have developed out of “intolerable experiences” are not seen as problems to be quickly solved or parts to be immediately integrated, but as courageous survivors from the past whose function in the person’s life must be respected. The degree of healing (disidentification, self-acceptance, insight, etc.) desirable for a client at any given time is therefore a function not only of his current ability to balance ego strength, emerging wounding, and higher-unconscious experience, but also of his choices.

This deeper object-relations empathy of course demands that the therapist too has engaged his own darkness and found something stable, solid, and unbroken in the midst of all that was chaotic and bleak. The client who admits, "If I shed light into the darkness of my past and recognize my wounding, I'm scared that what light I do have will disappear," can only feel confident that his admission is clearly heard and held by a therapist who has been there himself. Only such a therapist will be able to assist a client in learning ways to cooperate with images, sub-personalities, and symbols from both sectors of the psyche, while maintaining this empathic stance.

So while this object-relations perspective clearly helps the therapist to remain empathically attuned to the client's past and present world, it also allows the therapist to become more empathic regarding his own personal inner experience ("countertransference"). In touch with his own object-relations wounding, the therapist may for example be less likely to act on those aspects of himself who might "hurry things along" or "make things happen" in an effort to smooth over the pain. The therapist may then perhaps find that connecting to a shared depth of pain with a client is a more authentic and healing response than the denials and "solutions" inflicted upon them both in childhood. There is here a clear imperative for we therapists to walk our own ongoing path of object-relations healing and growth.

Finally, I would like to say that this research monograph seems but one small step in the task of elaborating the childhood experiences underlying subpersonality formation. But my hope is, with Assagioli, that subpersonality theory—and other aspects of psychosynthesis theory—can some day bridge psychosynthesis with other psychological systems in ways which are enriching for all. I believe that such theory development is essential for understanding the multitude of psychological configurations a therapist faces with his clients in any given day. However, the wise therapist knows too when to surrender theory to the sometimes less comfortable and more precarious task of being with his client in a way which provides the empathic holding environment so essential to "healing the human spirit."





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Chris Meriam** completed a three-year advanced training in Psychosynthesis fifteen years ago, under the guidance and supervision of one of Roberto Assagioli's first generation students, Dr. Edward Turner of Highpoint Northwest. Chris has worked as a psychotherapist and educator since the early 1970s, first in community mental health and subsequently in private practice. He maintains a counseling office in Bellevue, Washington, and is the director of Psychosynthesis of Puget Sound.

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