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## Anxiety, Mass Crisis and 'the Other'

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### Introduction

This chapter sets out a way in which an emotion – namely, anxiety – shapes the response to mass crises, such as potential epidemics, threats of terrorism, and influxes of refugees. The sense in which the term 'anxiety' is used in this chapter can be defined in relation to fear: fear is said to have a specific object to which it is a reaction, whereas anxiety is defined by the absence of a specific object.<sup>1</sup> It often relates to a *potential* danger. This chapter argues that the anxiety evoked by the threat of mass crisis elicits 'othering' or the location of negative aspersions, and often blame, with 'the other'. The chapter synthesises a number of theories to foster understanding of the exacerbation of 'othering' at times of crisis.

Since the concept of 'the other' is central to the chapter's thesis, its connotations must be made explicit. Broadly speaking, the chapter adopts the notion of 'the other' widely used in cultural theory and, in particular, in the theories of Said (1978), Gilman (1985) and Crawford (1994). Here 'the other' generally applies to those outside of, and implicitly subordinate to, the dominant group. 'Others' may be less powerful groups within a particular society (such as women) or identified out-groups (such as, in many societies, gay people) and 'foreigners'. A now classical example of 'the other' is described in Said's (1978) writing concerning 'the Orient' – an entity constructed by European culture. Said proposed that members of 'the Orient' did not represent their own emotions, presence or history. Rather, 'the Orient' was filtered through the lens of European culture. The superiority of European identity was constructed and affirmed by way of this process. The Oriental 'Other' came to be associated with derogated practices

and values. This 'Other' provided the dominant culture with a repository into which it could project the values and practices from which it sought to distance itself.

While the debasement of a range of 'Others' and ascription of debased qualities to them forms a constant dynamic in many societies, in periods of potential mass threat and crisis the focus on the negative and threatening qualities of 'Others' intensifies. One only has to think of the amplification of anti-Semitism in the German economic crisis of the 1920s and 1930s to be reminded of this. The escalation of western anti-gay sentiment from the time when AIDS and its potential to become a pandemic were identified in the 1980s provides an example with less severe consequences. More recently, the ongoing workings of this process have been highlighted by suspicion of and violent attacks on 'Orientals' in the West when threats of a global spread of the SARS virus emerged.

It will be argued that anxiety is the driving force behind such intense responses and that during times of mass crisis<sup>2</sup> it assumes a more paranoid quality. In such periods those associated with undesirable qualities move from being represented as mildly threatening, a challenge to the core values of the society, to being seen as the purveyors of chaos. Thus while the 'Other' is defined in terms of difference and inferiority in relation to normative values in an ongoing sense, the social representations that arise at times of crisis intensify this distinction. They reflect a powerful division between a decorous, righteous 'us' and a disruptive, transgressive 'them' (Douglas, 1966). Vivid representations that declare which groups and practices 'pollute' the order and decorum of the 'us', of the community, proliferate (Douglas, 1992) such as the equating of Jews to vermin, bacteria and maggots in the key Nazi text *Mein Kampf* (see Bar-Tal, 1990).

Such representations can lead to the desire for the removal of the so-construed 'polluting' presence. The prototypical act that symbolically rids a community of impure elements, those represented as the source of chaos, thereby restoring order and a positive sense of identity, utilises scapegoats for the ritual transfer of evil from inside to outside the community (Douglas, 1995). Scapegoating has its counterpart within the individual psyche in the defence termed projection (Joffe, 2004). The chapter moves on to explore this response to anxiety, first in the context of the individual psyche – drawing primarily on ideas put forward by Melanie Klein – and then, at a societal level.

## The roots of othering in individuals: a micro-social focus

Klein (1946, 1952) developed her psychodynamic theory of the affective roots of human subjectivity from Freud's writing, particularly his formulation of the duality between the life and death instincts, set out in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1974 [1920]). Her developmental theory can be drawn on to provide insight into the link between emotion and public life, specifically anxiety and the treatment of 'the other' at times of mass crisis.

Klein was one of the early pioneers of the notion of object-relations within the psychoanalytic literature. She emphasised the salience of the interaction between the primary caregiver – usually the mother – and the infant, particularly in the first year of life, as the basis for development, including the development of thinking. In the early months, the infant's experience is characterised by feelings of satisfaction or frustration. These feelings are related in large measure to the mother's capacity to anticipate and respond to the infant's gamut of needs, both physical and emotional. At those times when its needs are fulfilled, the infant experiences the caregiver as loving. However, when its needs are unfulfilled, such as when hungry or upset, the infant experiences frustration. This introduces a more persecutory experience into the infant's mind in which it feels a mortal threat to its survival. Of course such feelings occur in a context in which the infant is thoroughly dependent on the caregiver. At times, when needs go unfulfilled, the caregiver is experienced as a hated, threatening object.

During this phase, termed the 'paranoid-schizoid' position by Klein, the infant is unaware that the loving mother is the same figure as the hated one. This enables the infant to keep the experience of the good mother separate from that of the bad mother.<sup>3</sup> In the vein of Freud, Klein believes that infants are orientated towards maintaining more positive feelings. Therefore, the infant not only splits the good from the bad in an effort to protect itself from bad feelings, it also projects the bad outward, away from the self, and into the caregiver. In ordinary mothering the caregiver is able to contain these feelings – usually anxiety, frustration or anger – by way of words of consolation and physical containment, thereby enabling the infant to introject (or take back into its mind) a positive experience and good feelings.

At a slightly later stage of development, around six months of age, the infant is able to perceive that the loving maternal object (the object of satisfaction) is also the hated object (object of frustration),

and that the recipient of its loving feelings has also been the recipient of its hateful feelings. This Klein termed the 'depressive position'. Here the infant is faced with anxiety of a more depressive nature, linked to an emerging concern about the state of the object, with a growing drive to repair any perceived damage. This 'position' is based on a greater capacity for integration within the infant's mind of different feelings (good/bad, love/hate) and of different perceptions of the maternal figure.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the structuring of the adult's representational world stems from the affects present in the earliest moments of infancy. Anxiety, in particular, forms an organising concept in the Kleinian psychodynamic understanding of humans. It is experienced from birth onwards. The maturing process revolves around strengthening and organising the self against anxiety. From the earliest stages of infancy splitting, introjection and projection are brought into play unconsciously, to reduce anxiety, thereby ensuring a sense of safety and security for the maturing being.

Most salient for a theory of how affects shape public life is that the earliest representational activity sustains a lack of integration of different feelings, within the developing being: one side of its experience is all good, and the other all bad, with the two kept separate in the infant's mind and available only as alternatives. In addition, the infant endeavours to keep the bad outside of itself, while clinging to the good. This early representational system establishes a way of viewing the world in simplistic terms: either all good or all bad. When one splits a middle ground or 'grey area' with which to think about self, others or experiences is missing. Residues of the split early picture of the world remain in the individual's pattern of representation even once subsequent psychic development (i.e. the 'depressive position') allows for apprehension of complexity, of the 'grey areas'.

A key emphasis of the Kleinian outlook is that the individual experiences similar anxieties and employs similar mechanisms for managing them throughout life. Rather than passing through phases and leaving them behind, each phase of development leaves its mark on the developing individual and each individual oscillates between these two 'positions' during their lifespan. Therefore, these early developments make up a template underpinning adult emotional and cognitive life. Importantly, when changes in the social environment make for insecurity, thereby raising levels of anxiety, forms of this early representational activity – in which 'the other' functions as the repository for the individual's own unwanted thoughts – re-emerge.

The pattern of representation that allows infants to handle anxiety is then reproduced in adult life.

Particularly relevant for theories concerned with the location of threat within 'the other' is a further concept developed by Klein (1946) and her followers, the notion of 'projective identification'. This concept describes a more complex dynamic that develops to deal with anxiety. Projective identification determines that parts of the self which one does not want to own are not only projected into external objects, but that these external objects are then seen to be possessed and controlled by, as well as identified with, the projected parts. Thus, for example, the objects or humans onto which people project their aggression become feared as a source of belligerence (Frosh, 1989; Moses, 1989). In this way, a cycle of persecutory anxiety is maintained, with the consequent need to defend against it.

Projective identification can be more fully demonstrated with reference to a study of Zambian adolescents' shared representations of AIDS (see Joffe and Bettega, 2003). In line with the inferior status of females in the society, and a consequent history of linking a range of illnesses to them, women form the representational repository in which this unwanted disease is lodged. Teenage girls are viewed as the propagators of HIV via their liaisons with 'sugar daddies' – older men who have sex with the girls in return for gifts or money – and with teenage boys. Men of varying ages who are involved in unsafe sexual liaisons are not held culpable for their consequences by Zambian adolescents: all responsibility lies with the girls. Within the representations that dominate, men – adolescent and sugar daddy alike – are threatened by HIV but do not transmit it; they are not actors in the spread of the epidemic. The adolescents – male and female alike – view girls as the dangerous vectors of AIDS and boys and men as helpless in the face of these diseased, contaminating females.

Male identity, as well as the male superiority that characterises the social system, is largely protected by way of such widely shared representations. Conversely, the young women onto whom the bad event is projected, are rendered dangerous. This speaks to the projective identification process and the role played by 'othering', to how a group can buttress a positive sense of identity and power via projection/othering. However, the projected material can return to haunt the group. That which is placed outside the space of the self comes back to torment it. One comes to fear that which one gets rid of in the project of representation construction. Therefore, rather than gaining a firm sense of safety and comfort from the projection of undesirable qualities

onto others, as is its unconscious aim, 'self' comes to experience 'other' as a threat by way of 'other's' association with polluting, contaminating qualities. The bad qualities that 'the other' is left to carry threaten to 'leak' back into the space of the self.

How else might people respond to crises? The earliest way of responding to anxiety, detailed above, develops the infant's capacity to order chaos by splitting good from bad objects and experiences, at the level of representation. However, in Klein's (1952) second, depressive developmental position, infants move into a space in which the ability to tolerate ambivalence forms. It is here that the capacity to deal with anxiety in a less split way develops. To be emotionally ambivalent is to be able to hold, simultaneously, positively and negatively charged feelings. This ambivalence is particularly difficult for the developing psyche since it must link and reconcile states that have previously been held apart to defend the core of the self. Complex, rather than simplistic and polarised, representations become possible. Radley's (1999) work on representations of ill people can be drawn on to elucidate the second position. Radley shows that theory that focuses on the exclusion of stigmatised groups, overlooks the compassion that is regularly shown towards those who suffer. In particular, a 'care ethos' is germane to the response to the ill, though it may coexist with a more blaming orientation. This shows that there are alternative ways of responding to heightened anxiety, such as might be evoked by the potential mass illnesses AIDS or SARS. However, it must be noted that the 'care ethos' is linked to those seen to have become the 'victims' of misfortune through no fault of their own. When 'choices' such as practising unsafe sex are seen to inform misfortune, the more blaming response may come to dominate.

In sum, early infantile representations, which leave their mark on the adult psyche, are orientated towards protection of the self from anxiety. To accomplish this protection, 'the other' becomes the repository of material that the individual seeks to push out from its own space. As the container of such associations, 'the other' can become an object of fear. These early building blocks of what is to be associated with others, rather than the self, leave their mark on the developing individual. Adults can be plunged back into the most basic of defences, the persecutory response, when mass threats raise levels of anxiety. It is useful to distinguish between persecutory anxiety, which is evoked when the individual's survival is felt to be under threat, and depressive anxiety, which is more likely to be constituted by care and concern. More than one type of anxiety can be evoked by the same crisis; for

instance, concern for those living in a region affected by SARS can occur simultaneously with paranoid anxiety about passing through that region. In addition, though beyond the scope of this chapter, following the clinically derived theory, variations will occur in accordance with individuals' defensive structures.

While psychodynamic<sup>5</sup> theorisation is often seen as solely concerned with the intra-subjective sphere, this chapter argues that it also has social relevance. From infancy to later life, the subjective management of anxiety springs from a relational process in which the self has a tendency to strive for protection from the negative feelings by dumping unwanted material onto 'others' at the level of representation. Holding onto these representations in relation to threatening phenomena has a self-protective motivation. However, crucial to a more social reading of psychoanalytic theory is the point that such representations also come to be constituted by the values and ideologies that circulate in the particular communities, cultures and societies in which individuals are embedded. The chapter moves on to elaborate this more social process.

### **From the psychodynamic to the broader social world**

Psychodynamic theory provides a useful account of the source of representations of 'the other', yet it does not explain what the contents of that material might be. It does not offer insight into the specific representations that people hold about 'others', such as those about females or Jews touched upon above. This is social representations theory's domain. The chapter will show how social representations establish what the individual can comfortably associate with self and in-group, and what is unacceptable and must be placed outside, with 'the other', in the service of identity protection. To make this leap, the chapter draws on strands of cultural and social theory compatible with the more clinically derived psychodynamic model set out above, but so far rarely linked to it.<sup>6</sup>

According to psycho-dynamically oriented cultural theorists, factors within individuals' social environments either activate or constrain their use of defence mechanisms such as projection (Sherwood, 1980). Events that get portrayed as particularly threatening trigger representations that contain elements of inter-group projection. However, in addition, the extent to which it is permissible to project onto certain groups is regulated by the social order, which is constituted by a range of phenomena including laws (for instance, anti-racism laws), norms that can have policy implications (for instance, political correctness,

sometimes linked to affirmative action policies) and socially circulating representations. This chapter highlights the final of these aspects.

Social representations theory, instigated by social psychologist Serge Moscovici in the 1960s (see Duveen, 2001), sets out to explain how representations that circulate in the social environment come to impact upon individuals. Popular media are seen to hold a key place in the contemporary social environment and to play a central role in the transmission of information and knowledge concerning mass risks. Media portrayals of a risk event can generate blame, for instance.<sup>7</sup> Yet the media do not construct the targets of blame anew. Each individual and each media story is preceded and surrounded by a world of existing representations, a world in which certain groups have already been represented as respectable and others as degenerate. Representations that circulate in a particular social group prior to the individual's entry to it, influence who and what the individual chooses as the repository<sup>8</sup> for their responses to anxieties.

In the ideas they pass down through the generations, groups store not only a sense of which their disfavoured 'other' groups are, but what aspersions are to be linked to such groups. The groups and aspersions chosen are mutually informative of one another and are underpinned by the core values in the society. For example, Westerners mark out what it is to be a 'good' and upright citizen precisely by way of designating as 'other' that which does not represent western values (Crawford, 1994). A core western value is self-control. The body is the symbolic terrain upon which desire for and display of control are enacted (Crawford, 1985). In particular, the health of the body has come to act as a central metaphor for self-control, self-discipline, self-denial and will power (Crawford, 1994). 'Being healthy', and the appearance of being so has thereby become a metaphor for being a responsible, 'good' citizen. Conversely, 'the others' – smokers, obese people, alcoholics, drug users, people with AIDS – are all associated with excess and indulgence, with a loss of the West's most cherished qualities (see Joffe and Staerklé, in press).<sup>9</sup> Their contravention of the values that are held dear sets them up as repositories for projection of society's ills.

Social representations theory proposes certain mechanisms for the assimilation of new events, such as mass risks, into people's thinking. A key process in the formation of social representations is objectification (Moscovici, 2001 [1984]), which permits abstract ideas – such as the potential for a major escalation of syndromes such as SARS and AIDS – to be assimilated into representations. Objectification, which is highly analogous to symbolisation, involves people making

something abstract easier to grasp, by transforming it into a more concrete entity. This process can occur in a number of ways (see Moscovici and Hewstone, 1984), including abstract ideas being substituted with people (personification) or groups. The process is instantiated in SARS and AIDS immediately bringing certain groups to mind. Even the Ebola virus, which has affected only a handful of westerners, has been widely symbolised in Britain in terms of African's rampant illnesses and inadequate medical systems (see Joffe and Haarhoff, 2002). Widespread ways of thinking, or social representations, regarding 'the other' are grounded in such common points of reference. They are repeatedly dredged up at times when mass crises threaten in the service of protecting the inner space and, often, the superiority of dominant western groups.

### **Discussion: a theoretical integration**

In certain respects the social representations vision and the Kleinian psychodynamic framework are incompatible. The idea of representations pre-dating the individual, and the individual merely being born into a location within them, is very different from the notion of the infant constructing a representational system that is identity-protective and then slotting material in the environment into its own pre-existing system of thought. However, the two perspectives can sit together more comfortably if one differentiates between the structuring of people's representations, and the socially shaped contents that constitute these representations. I hope to have shown that even if proclivities towards certain patterns of representation are forged in the early years (that is, the structuring of people's representations), these proclivities in no way diminish the role played by the slowly unfolding social world's particular representations (that is, the contents) in constraining or exacerbating defensive responses to mass risks.

The theorisation of response to crises in terms of the two early Kleinian positions – paranoid-schizoid and depressive – is at odds with the contemporary psychology of responses to risk events, with its assumption that the individual is a self-regulating, largely rational thinker who makes certain systematic errors (for instance, see Slovic, 2000). In contrast, this chapter proposes a model of the individual responding to crisis as an essentially emotional and social being whose motivations are not easily fathomable due to their unconscious source (see Joffe, 1999, 2003, for an elaboration of this contrast). Even though there is increasing attention within psychology to non-conscious

processes, which harks back to ideas suggested by Zajonc (1980), among others, the links between such processes and responses within public life are under-developed. Furthermore, contemporary social psychology is reticent in relation to psychodynamic thinking for a range of reasons, including its doubt that the patterning of adult representations is largely forged in infancy, before the individual has knowledge of the macro-social world. However, if one is concerned with the interaction of the ideas that circulate in public life, and the emotional systems that originate with individuals, socially oriented psychodynamic theorisation is invaluable. This chapter has argued that patterns of representation are established very early on, and that subsequent social material shapes the manifestation of these patterns in specific groups and individuals.

Theorisation of this process is not only important in itself, but also for understanding and minimising the powerful and damaging effects of 'othering'. Expressions of distaste fulfil unconscious emotional needs for those who express them, and those who are the recipients of these expressions receive 'powerful doses of bad psychic stuff' (Rustin, 1991). These transactions are so potent and damaging precisely because they do not operate merely at a cognitive level, like the statements of opinion that 'othered' groups and individuals also have to deal with. Therefore, informing people of their 'othering' tendencies at times of crisis may have little effect, since the tendency's force derives from the level at which it operates: the unconscious. This level of functioning is difficult to address and resists argument precisely because it does not engage with conscious levels of functioning. This line of thought is very similar to the one that stresses the power of social representations. Social representations are so powerful precisely because they are taken for granted and therefore appear to be logical, necessary and natural (Oyserman and Marcus, 1998).

## **Summary and concluding remarks**

A framework for understanding how people use 'the other' at times of raised anxiety has been forged in this chapter. The positive identity of 'us' is sustained through imbuing others with devalued properties. When faced with anxiety provoking situations there is a rearrangement in people's representations of themselves and of others. People organise their representations in accordance with the struggle for a boundary between an inner space whose purity they hope to maintain, and a polluted, outside world. The foundations of this process lie in unconscious

responses. Freud's bodily metaphor for the projection of 'bad' outward – spitting out bad-tasting food – becomes layered with wider social and moral connotations as the human being becomes acculturated, and such connotations are integrated into his/her identity. Identity is forged, at least in part, by a sense of difference from others, and by excluding those whom the individual, and the culture in which the individual is located, associates with undesirable qualities:

If the aim of a system is to create an outside where you can put the things you don't want, then we have to look at what that system disposes of – its rubbish – to understand it, to get a picture of how it sees itself and wants to be seen (Phillips, 1995, p19).

This statement is highly complementary with the claim, made by cultural theorists such as Said, that the way that a culture defines the 'Other' discloses how it characterises itself. One particular social representation that is linked to an array of 'Others' in western culture is their lack of self-control (Joffe and Staerklé, in press). Since social representations regulate the extent to which it is permissible to project onto certain groups, those pertaining to lacking control single out certain group for scapegoating. The extreme and growing stigmatisation of obese people and smokers is illuminated by this finding. Clearly, western culture seeks to characterise itself as restrained, and in control, regarding the body. Self-control over mind – symbolised by scientists with their mastery in the face of risk – also forms a key part of the western conception of itself.

In conclusion, it must be emphasised that according to psychodynamic theorisation responses to mass crises need not be solely tied in with othering. The chapter has established that ongoing tensions between 'us' and 'them' are intensified at moments of potential danger and crisis. At such times, the early splitting mechanism of defence reappears in adults, and the 'other' becomes the target of a rich array of projections, which contain those aspects of experience from which individuals seek to distance their 'selves'. Othering is a way of protecting self and in-group; it is defence by way of representation. It also serves the function of status quo maintenance, in that each society perpetuates existing values by the ways in which it responds to crises – for instance, by asserting which groups contravene the self-control ethos, in western contexts.

The particular characteristic of the early, split state that is reinvented at such times is that contradictory feelings cannot sit together. Were

they to do so they would facilitate a rather complex orientation towards threats and towards other groups. However, it is important to highlight that in the course of early development people learn to think in this complex way, to reconcile the split parts. This subsequent aspect of development and its consequences for mass responses is often neglected in theories of 'othering'. It lends hope that splitting is neither inevitable nor unchangeable. It has implications not only for those hoping to rectify social exclusion, but also for opposing the notion that currently pervades psychological theory, that negative stereotyping and prejudice are an inevitable and routine part of what it is to be human.

### Notes

- 1 It must be noted that this does not correspond fully with the Freudian distinction (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973), but is fairly widely used in the psychoanalytic literature.
- 2 However, caution is called for in relation to framing the litany of 'hate crimes' or acts of genocide as responses to crises. Rather, a sense of threat and imminent crisis can sometimes be engineered in order to justify the harsh treatment of 'Others'. While bearing this in mind, many of the writings in the field subscribe to a notion that the negative representation of the Other intensifies as the response to a material crisis, such as an escalating epidemic.
- 3 For Klein, the embryonic nature of the infant's cognitive capacities mean that it is unable to relate to the mother as a whole object, incorporating all aspects of her, but relates to her on the basis of part-objects. For Klein, these primarily involve aspects of the mother's body, especially the breast, which is often linked to the first experience of the maternal object via the feeding relationship.
- 4 Part-object relationships are replaced by whole object relationships.
- 5 It must be noted that the Lacanian School of psychodynamic theory and psychodynamically rooted cultural theory are not drawn upon in this chapter.
- 6 A rich tradition of British sociological thought also extends psychodynamic thinking into the broader social world (see for instance Rustin, 1991; Richards, 1989), though this tradition has not engaged with social representations theory.
- 7 Of course those who construct the event within popular media are also influenced by the defences outlined above. In addition, they construct the event in accordance with their audiences' preferences.
- 8 Thus each social group has various 'repositories' (Sherwood, 1980), which it maintains as potential targets for its projection: 'Every social group has a set vocabulary of images for this externalised Other. These images are the product of history and of a culture that perpetuates them ... From the wide range of the potential models in any society, we select a model that best reflects the common presuppositions about the other at any given moment in history' (Gilman, 1985, p20).

- 9 A counter-trend is also in evidence. Crawford proposes that in western culture the self is not just associated with control but with a release from it. Pleasures, desires, gratification and play are intrinsic aspects of consumer culture. However, rather than holding these two antithetical components together, the culture expunges its association with the uncontrolled aspects – such as addictions – linking them with disparaged ‘others’. These ‘others’ are blamed for bringing their ill health upon themselves, and held outside of the culture symbolically, so that the self cannot be morally infected.

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