

## OBJECT CONSTANCY (The third degree impasse)

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### INTRODUCTION

One of the most difficult concepts to teach to people training to be Transactional Analysts is what the *Goulding's*(1978) call the third degree impasse which they describe as, "Here the injunction not to exist is so early, perhaps even prenatal, that the person feels not worthwhile, valueless, and deserving death" (P149).

Perhaps one of the best statements I have read on impasses is by Ken Mellor(1980). He notes the following characteristics of third degree impasses: The age of the person when it begins to develop is from conception to 1 year. It occurs in the person's non-verbal stage, it is the I-I stage of development or the narcissistic stage where the person has little idea of separateness from mother ("All is me").

In psychoanalytic terms as was developed by Sigmund Freud there is a particular type of third degree impasse that is known as object constancy. Very young children child have a sense of life as being "All is me". They have no sense of "I exist - and others also exist in the world being separate from me". As a child develops object constancy it begins to realise that the object (mother) is separate from him. The problem with that is: "What if mother decides to go away" and thus he would shrivel up and die just like the baby bird who falls out of the nest and is left to die. By mother (the object) constantly being there most times the baby cries, then the child gets a sense of the object being constant. That is he starts to feel secure that she wont go away and secure that she and I are two separate people. Object constancy problems occur when the object is not constant. The primary parenting figure which is usually the mother for some reason is not in the infant's life in a constant fashion. This can be obvious when there is clear neglect of a child. For instance the mother may have an ongoing alcohol addiction and thus the child is left for long periods of time with no care. Or there can be instances of benign neglect where the infant is adequately fed, clothed and housed but for some reason the emotional needs are neglected. For instance the mother may be ill, or have significant emotional problems of her own and so forth.

Third degree impasses and object constancy problems probably only occur in about only 5 to 10% of the general population so it is not a common problem but people with such difficulties do tend to come into contact with counsellors as they do struggle in life and present a wide variety of symptoms.

## EXAMPLE

Wendy Tarrant recently wrote a statement or piece of prose that manages to capture some of the main features of object constancy problems. I thought it was so good that she has agreed to have it printed in the TA Times and allowed me to discuss it for the readership.

### The Sensation of Annihilation

Scare? No, this is not scare.  
It's more than scare. Much, much more.  
It's an enveloping sensation that overwhelms me inside and out.  
It zaps every muscle, every vein, every ligament, every tendon.  
My body burns.  
A sense of hollowness ensues.  
I fall to the ground. I crawl.  
I feel so weak. Lifeless.  
There is nowhere to go, nobody to hold.  
I scream. No words. I just scream.

It sits there at the rock bottom of my soul.  
Camouflage. Unnoticed.  
It's waiting. It's trickery.  
It's disguised.  
I don't know it's name.  
Suddenly, it's there again.  
The zapping, the burning creeping through my body.  
I scream. No words. I just scream.

It knocks when I am left alone.  
Not just when I am alone, but when I am left alone.  
Left alone not knowing when anyone will return.  
Are they gone forever?  
Here it comes again. The zapping, the burning.  
I can see, I can touch, I can smell but....  
I do not exist.  
I scream. No words. I just scream.

I wish someone would come.  
I wish someone would come and take this pain away.  
Why don't they come?

Why don't they hear my cry, my yearning?  
If only someone would tell me, "You're OK"  
Then I would feel better. Wanted.  
Nobody comes.  
Only the zapping, the burning.  
I scream. No words. I just scream.

I Learn.  
I learn to live with the Zapping and Burning.  
They've been with me for along time.  
At least they make me scream.  
At least they make me go crazy.  
At least they give me a sense "I'm alive"  
But now....  
Now I've got to know them.  
I've got to know who they are protecting.  
Who they are disguising.  
And....  
As I see behind them.  
I see Annihilation

I know its name now.  
This sensation.  
This sensation of annihilation.  
We are more acquainted.  
I can talk to it now.  
I can tell it "I'm OK". I AM ALIVE!  
No more screaming.  
No more zapping. No more burning.  
I DO EXIST!!!

Wendy Tarrant.

## BEYOND OUR OWN WORLD VIEW

As was mentioned before this is all pre-verbal 'stuff'. That is, problems with object constancy begin to develop before the child has learnt to speak (verbalise). So how do you teach about non-verbal problems when all you have is verbalisations (words)? A problem indeed. Also in training to be a Transactional Analyst one of the pivotal things to learn is that the great majority of the rest of the world does not see the world the same as I do. People tend to assume that others think and feel the

same way they do about life and the world.

For example Wendy states, "I wish someone would come". All of us would believe we have felt such a thing at some point in our lives. We can understand the statement by recalling our own feeling of: "I wish someone would come". Then most of us would feel that we understand what Wendy is talking about. But most of us do not. The 90% who do not have object constancy problems need to take their feeling of - "I wish someone would come" - and imagine it magnified 50 times and then you have some understanding of what Wendy is talking about. To learn how to understand what our clients are talking about we need to be able to move beyond our own egocentrism.

## FEATURES FOR DIAGNOSIS

There are other features in this piece that show the signs of a third degree impasse and difficulties with object constancy.

1. The pre-verbal quality is shown with her repeated line:

"I scream. No words. I just scream."

2. The use of strong language:

Annihilation, burning, scream, rock bottom of my soul, that overwhelms me.

3. The use of body metaphor

"It zaps every muscle, every vein, every ligament, every tendon.

"My body burns."

"the burning creeping through my body."

4. The totality of the language

"every muscle, every vein, every ligament, every tendon"

"It's an enveloping sensation"

"There is nowhere to go"

5. The statements about abandonment

"nobody to hold"

"It knocks when I am left alone.

Not just when I am alone, but when I am left alone.

Left alone not knowing when anyone will return.

Are they gone forever?"

"I wish someone would come."

"Why don't they hear my cry, my yearning?"

## CONCLUSION

Taken together these do show many features of a third degree impasse. A difficult thing to diagnose because you can't see one or touch one. How does one explain a feeling of annihilation? A difficult task which I think Wendy has done as

well as one can.

#### REFERENCES

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Reprinted from:

*TA Times*. November 2004, Pages 10 - 14.