1. About Infantile Sense of Omnipotence

Theoretically, suppose infant enjoys a halcyon peacefulness within the uterus, and birth breaks this state. Thereafter the infant fantasizes to return to this state. One could also say that human-being uses all his life to return to this state, and when infant can obtain what Winnicott regarded as the “good enough care,” without realizing the cause and the causation, the infant believes that such fantasy is realized, and therefore believes that him or herself has this magic power. Just through simple imagining, they could realize their dreams---this is the stage of infantile sense of omnipotence.

With the later discovery of the external object, the infant gradually becomes conscious of other people and reacts to them, which impairs the infant’s sense of omnipotence, and they magically attribute it to its parents being omnipotent. Generally speaking, a sense of omnipotence is a kind of defense mechanism for infant’s vulnerability. During this period of life of total dependency, infantile sense of omnipotence will serve as a defense to help these vulnerable creatures to live.

However, repeated feeling of helplessness crushes the toddler’s sense of omnipotence, and later they try to abandon this idea that lacks boundary, so as to understand their own limitations and the power of parents and others. In this way, children form their ability of reality testing. It is assumed that when, infant develop into a child, it is necessary for it to have this phase of feeling omnipotent, and the “good enough care” from parents are regarded as the supporting environment for this sense of omnipotence. When the fragile infant develops into a relatively stronger child, the intentional or unintentional failure of parental care serves as an opportunity for it to abnegate sense of omnipotence and embrace reality. No longer does the child regard itself as a the center of the universe, but shares the universe with others. Children will then not become “Tina” or “Edwin” as in this book, with a strong and exaggerated need to be seen, lapsed in the compensation for narcissism.

Winnicott believes that “children need a long enough feeling of omnipotence,” while Brody seems to be more realistic. She believes that such a “long enough feeling of omnipotence” is nothing but an alluring fantasy, rather than the reality, that is, a time when the caregiver put infant in the center in order to fulfill their own desires. Most infant and children acquire a sense of reality that is full of compromise.

She continues to ask: does the argument of infantile omnipotence represent our innate anxiety and helplessness? She believes that, we may have neglects the infant’s timidity toward harm, as well as its lack of freedom due to the need for maintaining object relations. She then indicates that with scientific breakthroughs in neuro-science, probably there will be more and more scientific, rather than imagined, theory of human infant development. As I wrote here, I could not respect more of this lady’s inner strength. I cannot imagine how much courage it takes for a scholar, who devotes her whole life to the study of infant development, to cast doubt on the theory on which she bases her life’s study, close to the end of her life. Perhaps for a scholar, it is either to be tested or to be negated, insofar as it is in politics.
2. About Synthetic Processes
Psychoanalysis has always argued that libido and aggression are two biological instincts of human being. Besides, Freud also named three main synthetic instincts—voyeurism, exhibitionism, and cruelty. Fenichel refers to this concept as “partial instincts.” Synthetic instinct is unlike libido and aggression which has a biological basis, and these synthetic instincts can be understood to be determined by the relationship between an individual and an object. When synthetic instinct is initially discussed, Freud deduces the normality from pathology. For instance, it goes from understanding voyeurism to normal observation, and then elevating to search, explore and study; from exhibitionism to normally being observed, desire being seen, as well as from cruelty to compassion.

She believes that psychoanalysis overemphasized the Oedipus complex, with too much attention given to study main instincts such as libido and aggression, etc., and there is hardly any material relating to when and how synthetic instincts take the priority during the pre-oedipal period, and how to maintain its central influence in the years to come. She believes that psychoanalysis’ neglect to synthetic instincts leads to a lack of attention paid to the accompanied psychic events of major developments.

She has also discussed with Anna Freud about the synthetic instincts observed on children. Anna Freud believes that, the child neurosis does not include the first one or two years of life. Rather than neurosis, she believes that they fall under the category of personality structure. Whereas the study of Brody starts from the birth, as she pays attention to infant’s first months till one or two years of age, a period of time which is neglected by Freud and Anna. Needless to say, Brody’s study completes the insufficiency of classic psychoanalytic theory.

She believes that because of the constant check-up, observation of the adult, infant develops the desire to see, and the cruelty of child or infant represents the desire to conquer others. These effects of instinct can easily be observed from children’s behavior, because they are subject to impulses. She believes that synthetic instincts reflect the relationship between children and objects. This reminds me of a Chinese version of “Loli.” Because of the act of looking at the little cousin’s genitals, a three year old Chinese little boy was derided as “little hooligan.” Little did people know that the mother of this little boy often forces this boy to touch her genitals when she was about to go to sleep. This little boy later grew up to become a compulsive voyeur. The inconsistency and hypocrisy of the adult’s behavior, using children to satisfy its own desire, puts so much confusion in the mind of this little boy who is starting to have sexual identity and awareness, bursting with curiosity. Suppose the family of this little boy possess an alternative attitude that reflects an understanding of the developmental stage of the child, not using the child to satiate its own needs, it should have been different.

Due to the perceived scarcity in the study of synthetic instinct in children’s life, she chose five cases from her 131 long term cases so as to describe her observation to children’s synthetic instinct. Among all of these five American cases, we can easily find the Chinese counterpart. Parent’s lack of understanding to children’s behavior is especially pronounced. Very few parents are self aware of their moment to moment subjective experience’s influence to children and infants.
Nor would they encourage and help the child to describe their thoughts and feeling to parents. Children also did not get enough reassurance to know that their ideas will be heard. She believes that, under normal circumstances, parents barely have chance to understand children’s emotional and cognitive needs, especially when the child is two years old, which is generally thought of as the “dreadful two-year-old” (Chinese parents probably still did not have such concepts. ) “The dreadful two-year-old” represents the hurdles parents face when they deal with requests of independence. (This is generally regarded as the first hurdle in independence, the second hurdle is during the adolescence)

Just as anything has its binary opposite, synthetic instinct not only has its negative side, it also has a positive side, that is, with a good object relationship elevating to life’s creative part. From her training, theoretical leaning, as well as the time she is at, it is not hard for us to see that she is a classical psychoanalytical scholar. However, with her emphasis on the synthetic instinct, especially to its relationship with object, as well as her emphasis on the social rather than biological motivation, aligned with children’s earliest interpersonal relationship, it is not hard to discern traces of object relations theory. She believes that during the first months and years of human life, the basic trust built between parents and children will affect the representations of synthetic instincts. For a child who learns to trust from her caregiver, synthetic instinct may have positive effects.

Finally she points out the meaning of synthetic instincts is for the purpose of a good object relations and a good participation. For instance, when an adult gently put his hand on the head of a child, the child should request the adult to put his hand back onto his head, which indicates the affection from the adult and the child’s active quest for trust with the adult.

This process is both easy and hard, depending on whether the touch contains love and tenderness.

This book, completed when Brody is 95, was translated by Litao Wang from the Qingdao mental health center, as well as Ping Yu from Wuhan hospital for psychotherapy. We appreciate their work under time constraints, and their devotion of their leisure time, as well as the effort of editor Ms. Wen Cao.

Last but not least, with the publication of Chinese version, we wish Dr. Brody a happy one-hundred-year-old birthday! To a long life!