Forms of Concern: A Psychoanalytic Perspective

Rami Tolmacz

Department of Psychology, Bar-Ilan University

Whereas Freudian psychoanalysis focused on psychopathology and aggression, various object relation theories gradually began to deal with such positive issues as caring, sympathy, compassion, and positive attitudes toward others. This resulted in a number of distinctions between different forms of concern for others, which are characterized by the specific motives that generate them, the quality of emotions accompanying them, and the ego functions related to them. In my lecture and chapter I will describe the different forms of concern and explain how different object relation theorists have conceptualized them. Specifically, I will discuss Winnicott’s distinction between guilt-driven concern and joy-driven concern, and Bowlby’s distinction between sensitive caregiving and compulsive caregiving. With the development of the intersubjective approach to psychoanalysis in recent decades, an important element was added to the conceptualization of various kinds of caring attitudes toward others. This approach emphasizes that significant others can be perceived not only as ‘objects’ characterized by the functions they fulfill but also as subjects with internal worlds of their own. Thus, it is possible to distinguish forms of concern based on the extent to which others are perceived as subjects or objects, which in turn affects how concern is manifested in thought, emotion or behavior. This intersubjective approach to psychoanalysis fits well with the movement within attachment theory and research toward the analysis of sensitive vs. insensitive discourse about emotions, in both parent-child and adult couple relationships. I argue and present evidence that joy-driven concern stemming from attachment security fosters a healthy balance between considering one’s own needs and considering the needs of others. In contrast, attachment insecurity and unbalanced perception of one’s own and others’ needs lead to less concern for others, guilt-driven concern, or compulsive caregiving.