Object Relations Theory is based on the careful, developmental observation of young children.

- While Freud emphasized the first 4 to 6 years of life
- Object Relations Theories, like Klein, emphasized the first 4 to 6 months
  - Emphasis is placed on the infant’s drives (hunger, sex, etc.) and that these drives are directed at an object such as a breast, penis, vagina, or other objects.
  - The child’s relation to that object is fundamental and serves as a prototype for all later relations to whole objects like mother and father.
  - The very early tendency of infants to relate to partial objects gives their experiences an unrealistic or fantasy-like quality that affects all later interpersonal relations.
  - Klein’s ideas tend to shift the focus of psychoanalytic theory from organically based stages of development to the role of early fantasy in the formation of interpersonal relations.

Other theorist placed emphasis on different aspects of early development

- Margaret Mahler believed that children’s sense of identity rests on a three-step relationship with their mother.
  - First, infants have basic needs cared for by their mother
  - Second, they develop a safe symbiotic relationship with an all-powerful mother
  - Third, the child emerges from their mother’s protective circle and establish their separate individuality
  - In general, Mahler’s work was concerned with the infant’s struggle to gain autonomy and a sense of self.

- Heinz Kohut theorized that children develop a sense of self during early infancy when parents and others treat them as if they had an individualized sense of identity.
  - Extensive application to borderline and narcissistic personality disorder.
- John Bowlby investigated infants’ attachment to their mothers as well as the negative consequences of being separated from their mothers.
  - This theory emphasizes different stages of separation anxiety
Mary Ainsworth and colleagues developed a technique from measuring the type of attachment style an infant develops toward its caregivers. These developmental psychologists were the first in a long series of what were known as baby psychologists.

- These individuals were very interested in the parenting experience and its effects on the child.
- Some of the commonly known names included Harry Harlow, Benjamin Spock, T. Barry Braselton, and even Fred Rogers!

Object Relations Theory in a nutshell

Object relations theory is an offspring of Freud’s instinct theory yet it is different from it in some important ways.

- Object Relations Theory places less emphasis on biologically based drives and more importance on consistent patterns of interpersonal relations.
- While Freud’s theory is paternalistic, emphasizing the power and control of the father, object relations theory tends to be more maternal, stressing the intimacy and nurturing of the mother.
- Object Relations Theory generally sees human contact and relatedness, not sexual pleasure, as the prime motive of human behavior.

Critique

- Product of early mother-child relation
- The whole relationship is focused on fending off anxiety, fears of annihilation, and abandonment.
- This theory rates high on the measure of determinism vs. free-choice.
- Object Relations Theory can be pessimistic or optimistic, depending on the quality of the relationship
  - Healthy relationship produces a psychologically healthy child
  - Unhealthy relationship produces a pathological, self-absorbed personality
- Object Relations Theory tends to be more causal than teleological as early relations are seen as causing or shaping personality.
- This approach is high on unconscious determinants because all of these theorists trace the determinants of behavior to early infancy before language.
  - Many personal traits and attitudes are preverbal and remain unaware of the complete nature of these traits and attitudes.
Because Klein places emphasis on death instinct and phylogenetic endowment, emphasis is placed more on the biological rather than on the environmental forces.
  o However, the relation of mother-child is environmental and this theory leans toward emphasizing the social determinants of behavior.

Finally, Object Relations Theory emphasizes the similarities between people. Most of the discussion in all of these approaches emphasizes the differences between healthy and unhealthy individuals with little understanding of healthy personality.