

The Clouded Mirror: Trauma and Attachment

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“In individual emotional development the precursor of the mirror is the mother’s face”. D. W. Winnicott *Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development* [1].

When we look into someone’s eyes, we can feel loved, or hated, dismissed or understood.

Even as an adult its often a powerful experience and brings us into contact with the lingering resonance and echo of infancy and with that a sense of our struggle to be recognised by our first mirror - our mother.

We all have buried inside us a felt memory of the experience of being mirrored in our mother’s eyes.

For first-time mothers, breastfeeding and interacting with their infant can bring back that sense of continuity, symbiosis and connection - in a good way.

But it can also bring feelings that are frightening and incoherent, like falling into an alternate existence - or into nothing at all.

In his article inspired by Lacan’s essay on *The Mirror Stage*, psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott examines our early experiences of being mirrored.

What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother’s face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself, In other words the mother is looking at the baby and what she looks like is related to what she sees there. All this is too easily taken for granted. I am asking that this which is naturally done well by mothers who are caring for their babies shall not be taken for granted. I can make my point by going straight over to the case of the baby whose mother reflects her own mood or, worse still, the rigidity of her own defences. In such a case what does the baby see?

Of course nothing can be said about the single occasions on which a mother could not respond. Many babies, however, do have to have a long experience of not getting back what they are giving. They look and they do not see themselves. There are consequences. [...] the baby gets settled in to the idea that when he or she looks, what is seen is the mother’s face. The mother’s face is not then a mirror. So perception takes the place of apperception, perception takes the place of that which might have been the beginning of a significant exchange with the world, a two-way process in which self-enrichment alternates with the discovery of meaning in the world of seen things” [My emphases].

Although, of course this is quite dense, what I think Winnicott means is that mothers who are distracted by their own thoughts or are emotionally unavailable (through stress, anxiety, fear, or unresolved trauma) will not respond to the baby in a way that is useful for the infant’s developing sense of self. This lack of response takes away the opportunity for the baby to see his or herself reflected and responded to in the mother’s face. They also lose the opportunity for exchange and to understand the social environment as a place of exchange where their developing self is part of a potential for relationship.

This early mirroring is also theorised by self-psychologist Heinz Kohut in his psychoanalytic theories. For Kohut, the major task of the therapist is to provide the mirroring that was absent in infancy and he sees the therapist's role as that of "self-object", providing empathetic acknowledgement for the often neglected or repressed "true" self and allowing that often fragile self to emerge.

Both writers underline the power of these experiences - the experience of being mirrored. They also emphasise that our first social experiences can impact our felt sense of being attached, being loveable and underneath those, being there at all.

It seems like a huge and weighty impact for something that most of us don't remember.

Contemporary researchers have found evidence to support Winnicott's theories. For example, we know from the work of Alan Schore that facial expressions and visual cues are vitally important for early development and the attachment relationship. Schore has theorised that our right brain dominates brain growth in infancy and he has helped us understand where some of the unverballed feelings teased out through the work of therapy come from and why they provide a powerful undercurrent for our social relationships - and our sense of self [2].

In her book on attachment and mother's eyes, psychoanalyst Mary Ayres argues that the consequence for those who miss out on being mirrored adequately is a primary sense of shame. This sense of shame becomes conflated and incorporated into the developing sense of self and provides an unrecognised core around which the personality is formed. It is not normally available to conscious thought, but remains as a felt sense of being unloveable or somehow defective [3].

As adults in therapy we seek help for issues that unfold as a result of underlying feelings of unloveability. The right therapist will provide us with mirroring, and allow us to feel understood and empathised with.

As a therapist, I am well aware that words often fail - they fail me and they fail my clients. But understanding, empathy, and yes, love can bridge the gaps that language just falls into.

For Kohut and other theorists, empathy is the primary healing force in therapy, and without it we merely provide intellectual argument - words and ideas that glance off the deeper wounds of early trauma [4].

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