

Hate in the phallic container

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Abstract

A recent article in this journal, "The phallic container in the couple: splitting and diversion of maternal hate as protection of the infant" (Perkel, 2006), explores the phenomenon of maternal hate. Perkel (2006) argues that the mother in the post-partum period, threatened by her feelings of hate for the infant, projects these onto the figure of the father/husband. Although this serves a necessary function in protecting the infant, Perkel notes that the diversion and splitting of maternal hate onto the father can create severe conflict in the couple. It is necessary for the couple therapist to be aware of this unconscious process in order to make sense of the sometimes irrational charges mothers direct towards their partners. The current paper responds to Perkel's contribution. Using the important concept of maternal hate as a starting point, the paper acknowledges the value of Perkel's formulation for couple therapy. It is argued, however, that understanding maternal hate may be limited if it leads to too exclusive a focus on the irrationality of motherhood without consideration of the relationship between inner and outer reality for both mother and father. The paper explores and subverts causal arguments postulating a unidirectional process of unconscious projection from mother onto father. The operation of maternal as well as paternal hate is then explored, followed by consideration of the circulation of hate in the container-contained relationship of the post-partum couple.