

The Enduring Significance of Psychoanalytic Theory and Practice

Gregory Lowder

The New York Psychoanalytic Institute

James Hansell

University of Michigan

Nancy McWilliams

Rutgers University

There is much current misunderstanding about contemporary psychoanalytic theory:

- As a general theory of the mind
- As a theory of psychopathology
- As a theory of social and group phenomena
- As the basis for psychotherapeutic treatments

Newsweek - March 27 2006 Cover story: “Freud in Our Midst”



- Psychoanalysis permeates our culture
- 2006 poll shows that 18% of Americans have been in talk therapy
- Terms such as “passive-aggressive,” “anal,” and “Freudian slip” are widely used
- The influence of sexual and aggressive impulses is widespread, and conflict and ambivalence are ubiquitous

Psychoanalytic/Psychodynamic Empirical Treatment Research

There is substantial research that supports psychoanalytic theory and treatment

Milrod, et al (2007). A randomized controlled clinical trial of psychoanalytic psychotherapy for panic disorder. American Journal of Psychiatry, 164(2): 265-272.

- Profiled in the New York Times on February 7, 2007
- 21 patients with Panic Disorder in twice-weekly psychodynamic psychotherapy for 12 weeks
- 16 of 21 patients experienced remission of panic and agoraphobia, along with remission of depression in treatment completers who were depressed
- American Journal of Psychiatry's conclusion:
Psychodynamic psychotherapy appears to be a promising non-pharmacological treatment for Panic Disorder

Leichsenring, F. (2005). Are psychodynamic and psychoanalytic therapies effective? *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 86, 841-68.

At least one RCT providing evidence for the efficacy of psychodynamic psychotherapy was identified for:

- Depressive disorders (4)
- Anxiety disorders (1)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (1)
- Somatoform disorder (4)
- Bulimia nervosa (3)
- Anorexia nervosa (2)
- Borderline personality disorder (2)
- Cluster C Personality disorder (1)
- Substance-related disorders (4)

Leichsenring, F. (2001). Comparative effects of short-term psychodynamic psychotherapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy in depression: A meta-analytic approach. *Clinical Psychology Review, 21*(3), 401-419.

- 6 RCTs contrasting manualized CBT and short-term psychodynamic psychotherapy (STPP)
- No substantial difference - only one of the studies suggested a possible superiority of CBT

Fonagy, P., Roth, A., & Higgitt, A. (2005). The outcome of psychodynamic psychotherapy for psychological disorders. *Clinical Neuroscience Research, 4*, 367-377.

- 20 published trials in which depressive and anxiety disorder symptoms were treated with psychodynamic psychotherapy
- Psychodynamic psychotherapy has better effectiveness in open trials or compared to waiting list or outpatient treatment in general

Beutel, M., Rasting, M., Stuhr, U., Ruger, B., & Leuzinger-Bohleber, M. (2004). Assessing the impact of psychoanalyses and long-term psychoanalytic psychotherapies on health care utilization and cost. *Psychotherapy Research*, 14, 146-160.

- Looked at 255 patients who had terminated their treatments with members of the German Psychoanalytic Association
- 70-80% of patients achieved good and stable psychic changes (average 6.5 years after ending)
- Qualitative analysis pointed to the value that patients continued to attach to their respective analytic experiences

Sandell. R., et al. (2000). Varieties of long-term outcome among patients in psychoanalysis and long-term psychotherapy: A review of findings in The Stockholm Outcome of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy Project (STOPP). *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 81, 921-942.

- 331 patients in psychoanalytic psychotherapy and 74 patients in various phases of psychoanalysis
- Improvement 3 years after treatment was positively related to treatment frequency and duration
- In follow-up, psychotherapy patients did not change but those who had psychoanalysis continued to improve

The role of psychoanalytic treatments

- When other treatment options have failed
- When treatment compliance is a problem
- Psychoanalytic therapies have the potential to affect long-range vulnerability by altering the way the patient deals with stressors and therefore to make more enduring changes
- Cost-effective

Guthrie et al. (1999). Cost-effectiveness of brief psychodynamic-interpersonal therapy in high utilizers of psychiatric services. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 56, 519–526.

- 110 patients randomly placed in either 8 weekly psychodynamic psychotherapy sessions or treatment as usual
- Psychotherapy patients had significantly better improvement in distress and social functioning
- Baseline treatment costs were similar, but the therapy patients showed significant reductions in the cost of health care utilization in the 6 months after treatment, and psychotherapy costs were recouped within 6 months

Empirical studies that support key areas of psychoanalytic theory, such as:

- Unconscious motivation
- Ambivalence and conflict
- Unconscious affective processes
- The influence of historical relationships, such as childhood experiences

The concept of unconscious motivation

- Consciousness is a recent development superimposed on an information processing system that worked well for millions of years
- Our culture highly privileges and pays attention to consciousness and free will
- Our ancestors successfully navigated complicated situations and relationships using resources and abilities other than individual consciousness

Examples of research on unconscious motivation

- The Swiss neurologist Edouard Claparede concealed a pin between his fingers and shook hands with a patient suffering from Korsakoff's disorder
- Upon meeting again the patient didn't recognize Claparede, but was unwilling to shake his hand despite not knowing why (Cowey, 1991)

Bargh, J. A. (1997). The automaticity of everyday life. In R. S. Wyer, Jr. (Ed.), *The automaticity of everyday life: Advances in social cognition* (Vol. 10, pp. 1-61). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

- Participants were primed with words relating to either achievement (e.g. strive) or affiliation (e.g. friend)
- Participants were paired with an incompetent partner to solve a challenging puzzle
- Success would humiliate the partner, while not being successful would protect their partner's self-esteem
- Participants who had been primed with achievement words outperformed participants primed with affiliation words

The concepts of ambivalence and conflict

- Freud posited that multiple psychological processes can proceed in parallel, which is similar to contemporary connectionist or parallel distributed processing (PDP) models in cognitive science

Emmons, R. & King, L. A. (1988). Conflict among personal strivings: Immediate and long-term implications for psychological and physical well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54, 1040-1048.

- Students listed 15 personal goals then rated how much each goal conflicted with other goals
- A matrix of their ratings was used to create a mean index of level of conflict for each student
- Students also reported how much they thought success in attaining the goal would lead to some conflict
- Dependent variables included daily mood reports taken twice a day over 21 consecutive days and reports of somatic complaints
- Conflict and ambivalence correlated significantly with reported emotions and somatic complaints

The concept of unconscious affective processes

- This fundamental psychoanalytic principle means that people can feel things without knowing they feel them and they can act on feelings of which they are unaware

Bruyer, R. (1991). Covert face recognition in prosopagnosia: A review. *Brain and Cognition*, 15, 223-235.

- Individuals with prosopagnosia, who lose the capacity to discriminate faces, consciously may show differentiated electrophysiological responses to familiar versus unfamiliar faces

Wegner, D., Shortt, J., Blake, A. W., & Page, M. S. (1990). The suppression of exciting thoughts. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, 409-418.

- Participants who were instructed to suppress an exciting thought about sex remained psychophysiologicaly aroused even while the thought was outside of their awareness
- They remained as aroused as participants instructed to actually think about the sexual thought
- Those instructed to suppress the thought did not habituate to it so that when the sexual thought returned they showed physiological arousal again
- This suggests that affect-laden thoughts kept from consciousness may continue to have an affective press

Transference: The influence of historical (e.g. childhood relationships) on current relationships

- One primary psychoanalytic idea is that of “transference,” which simply means that early relationship templates color how people see and interact in the world as adults.
- This idea is cogently captured in Wordsworth’s oft quoted phrase, “The child is the father of the man”

Attachment Theory

- Attachment styles are significantly influenced by early child/caregiver interactions
- Attachment style significantly affects social adjustment and personality
- The mother's responsiveness has shown to be the greatest predictor for the child's style of attachment
- The predictive power of the mother's - as opposed to the father's - attachment style refutes an exclusively genetic explanation

Andersen, S., & Cole, S. W. (1990). "Do I know you?" The role of significant others in social perception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59, 384-399.

- Participants were asked to provide a description of significant others and descriptions were embedded in narratives about fictional characters
- The participants wrongly attributed traits to the characters that stemmed from their templates, but were not originally part of the character's description
- In the words of these researchers, "The transference process is a basic mechanism by which the past comes to play a role in the present and it depends on relatively automatic social cognitive processes"

Mickelson, K. D., Kessler, R. C. & Shaver, P. R. (1997). Adult attachment in a nationally representative sample. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 1092-1106.

- In a non-clinical sample of 5,000 adults a history of parental loss and separation was associated with higher ratings of insecure attachment and lower attachment security

Boudewyn, A., & Liem, J. (1995). Childhood sexual abuse as a precursor to depression and self-destructive behavior in adulthood. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 8, 445-459.

- Childhood sexual abuse rendered adults susceptible to a number of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, suicidality, and self-destructiveness

These are only a few of hundreds of studies, mostly in the fields of cognitive science and social psychology, that substantiate many psychoanalytic ideas

*For an excellent and more complete overview see: Westen, D. (1998). *The scientific legacy of Sigmund Freud: Toward a psychodynamically informed psychological science.*

Psychological Bulletin. 124(3):333-371.

Other psychotherapy models have appropriated psychoanalytic theory without proper crediting.
Examples:

- All talking therapies
- Trauma theories
- Therapeutic alliance (CBT, IPT, and others)
- Childhood/developmental models
- Defense mechanisms (social psychology, cognitive science)

Why the myths about and misunderstandings of psychoanalysis?

- The dearth of affiliations between psychoanalytic institutes and universities
- The insularity of psychoanalytic institutes
- The historical under-emphasis of empirical research within psychoanalytic institutes – some legitimate challenges in collecting research, but much of it has to do with a dismissal of research

Why does psychoanalysis attract so much criticism?

- Ethnocentricity of some theorists
- Unwavering belief, by some clinicians, in the analyst's privileged perspective
- Discomfort with sexual, aggressive, and dependent aspects of human nature
- Historical pathologizing of diversity
- Concretization of theories (e.g. penis envy)
- Discomfort with the idea of the unconscious
- Feared subversive impact of psychoanalytic theory

Why learn about psychoanalytic theory?

- The current focus on theoretical convergence and integration
- “Brand name” therapies aren’t pure, and almost all contain components that may be deemed “psychoanalytic”
- The importance of understanding unconscious motivation to explain both clinical and social/political phenomena
- Psychoanalytic theory offers diagnostic alternatives