

The psychodynamic approach

We all need each other, but what do we need each other for? This is the big question which in turn leads on to another question: why is it that the problems we have with each other sometimes seem to be expressed in the form of what are called mental illnesses?

Well, psychoanalysis offers some interesting and provocative answers to these (and other) questions. For example, a Freudian psychoanalyst would answer that we need each other primarily for pleasure: the gratification of our instinctual needs, namely sex. An attachment analyst would say — you might have already guessed it — that our basic need for others is for a (hopefully secure) attachment.

Introducing psychoanalysis

However, I am racing ahead of myself and so I invite you to come with me now, as the Mighty Boosh would say, on a voyage through time and space, as I attempt to give you a brief overview of what psychoanalysis is, and why I would encourage you to study and engage with it.

In writing this, I am suddenly aware of feeling somewhat embarrassed by my use of this expression taken from one of my favourite television programmes. I am aware of feeling slightly childish and this, in turn, is evoking uncomfortable feelings, thoughts and memories from my childhood. I am becoming conscious of aspects of my childhood that I had forgotten or perhaps had repressed. I am also wondering whether acknowledging these childhood feelings and events would cause me more pain than repressing them. What a dilemma: either to keep certain feelings and memories unconscious in the hope that forgetting them will make them go away, or to make them conscious and acknowledge these painful events and feelings and also aspects of myself that I might not like. Welcome to the world of psychoanalysis!

Most people think of Sigmund Freud when they hear of psychoanalysis. However, there are more schools of psychoanalysis than you have had hot dinners. They were all started by great figureheads such as Carl Jung, Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, John Bowlby, Heinz Kohut, Peter Fonagy and Alan Shore, and they all have their committed followers.



We learn to form relationships with others based on the first one with our mother.

ImageState/Alamy

Where it all started

But back to the beginning. It was Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who claimed that the way of exploring why and how our unhappiness is disguised in the form of dreams, emotional problems, mental illnesses or repetitive forms of behaviour, is through a long and intense analysis (or some would say 'conversation') with a psychoanalyst. The person being analysed is encouraged to lie down on a couch and say whatever comes to his/her mind. This total freedom of speech is something that we usually cannot have in ordinary relationships, as it could get us into a great deal of trouble.

The psychoanalyst will try to encourage us to express these seemingly unacceptable thoughts and feelings, which could be of an aggressive and/or sexual nature, and have their origins in our childhood. Childhood is a time when we are learning from our parents the boundaries between ourselves and others and the appropriate expression of emotions. This process begins with our first relationship — with our mother — and it is from this that we learn how to form relationships

with others: fathers, siblings, friends and lovers. This is what some psychoanalysts refer to as 'knocking the "m" off mother'.

This expression sounds somewhat brutal and another psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, suggested that instead, there is a gradual process and that development is not about moving from a state of absolute dependence to absolute independence, but rather from relative dependence to relative independence. This means that we need to keep aspects of our childhood, which we carry within us. This is not considered to be a bad thing, as it helps to define us as human beings with a capacity to play and to be creative, both as a child and as an adult.

Criticising Freud

There have been many criticisms of classical Freudian psychoanalysis over the years. Among these criticisms are that it is a pseudoscience (i.e. not a real science) and that it tends to adopt a medical model when working with patients, in that the analyst holds the knowledge and truth and the patient is passive.

The Object Relational School of Psychoanalysis sees it differently, emphasising the need to focus on the relationship that exists between the patient and the therapist, rather than viewing their roles as separate. Therapists such as Donald Winnicott, Daniel Stern, John Bowlby and Stephen Mitchell, state that there is not such a division between the observer and the observed, between client and therapist. They see the analytic encounter as being more like two people talking to each other and that it is more of a process than a treatment, that our fundamental need is to be in a relationship with another person, to have some sense of mutuality. This is based on the infant's

relationship with its parents, where to become a 'self' we need to have experienced empathic mirroring.

The big questions

In my work as an analyst with my clients over the years, I have noticed that the same problems and questions come up over and over again, to be explored and understood:

- How do we learn to tolerate frustration, without resorting to aggression?
- Why is it difficult for some people to be both intimate and separate (to be part of a 'we' and retain a sense of an 'I')?
- Are the relationships we had with our parents the blueprints for whom we are attracted to in adulthood and do they also determine our attitude to those in authority over us?
- How do we move from being loved by our mother for ourselves, to loving our mother and seeing that she has a life of her own, to then being able to love another person?
- Why is it that some of us have a tendency to become attracted to destructive relationships?
- Why do I feel the compulsion to cut myself or why am I so depressed or angry all the time?

These are questions that I believe we all have to wrestle with, to a greater or lesser extent, and so I want to encourage you to study psychoanalysis and help provide some answers or solutions to these important and fascinating questions.

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