

PSYC SPOT PSYCHOLOGY CLINIC

Understand and Develop Your Inner-Workings

A Primer on Psychodynamic Therapy (PDT) Developmental | Relational | Insight-Oriented | Depth

NEWSLETTER #8

Psychodynamic Therapy (PDT), the descendant of Freudian Psychoanalysis, has a history of being depicted in caricature forms (e.g., therapist fixate on revealing hidden perversions) and discredited as being unscientific. While it will take a thesis to contextualize the above biases and misconceptions, I could at least point out top-tier journals and world-leading universities have stressed PDT is actually supported by a wealth of empirical evidence, just not the kind of evidence valued in the current system. **Specifically, PDT's interwoven theories on: (a) how and why mental health problems can develop and (b) how and why various therapeutic efforts can have the effects observed, are generally well supported.** Yet as noted in Newsletter #7, the current paradigm mostly focus on establishing procedures that can be methodically followed to somehow reduce some symptoms. Because PDT proponents strongly disagree with this vacuous paradigm, PDT is rarely subjected to its investigations. However, when parts of PDT did get proceduralized and tested (e.g., Schema Therapy, Mentalization-Based Therapy, Short-Term PDT), its derivatives are validated as evidence-based treatments.

So what are its key tenets? **First, PDT sees most if not all mental health problems as a function of how the person has developed and correspondingly operates in imperfect ways.** Focus is thus placed on knowing the developmental history and idiosyncrasies of the person, and symptoms may be reduced **"indirectly"** by patching gaps to enable more mature and adaptive ways of understanding and interacting with one's inside and outside world (e.g., may no longer fast and purge and obsess over being slim and attractive after forming a realistically positive and robust sense-of-self and secure attachment style). In contrast, many therapies lean towards construing mental health problems as distinct disorders that affect different individuals in more or less the same ways. Focus is thus placed on understanding the disorders people have, and disorder-defining symptoms are often targeted **"directly"** in treatment (e.g., scheduled and mindful eating for Eating Disorder).

Second, PDT utilizes the therapist-client relationship to gain insight into the issues (e.g., reflect on counter-transference) and subtly impact the client (e.g., "re-parenting" to patch gaps in development and offer other corrective influences). Thick books are needed to cover this multi-faceted element. As a simplistic example of one facet, when a client who has long been punished for expressing "burdensome" emotions at home started to unleash at the therapist, the therapist's efforts to embrace the storm and empathize (instead of reflexively calm the client with clinical techniques) can be an impactful and reflection-prompting experience.

Third, PDT recognizes people often hold beliefs, realizations, feelings, desires and such that can be in conflict. Instead of consciously reconciling them all, we may unconsciously deny or distort the distressing and/or subjectively unwanted ones. Classic examples include externalizing blame to protect one's ego, or internalizing fault to excuse a wronged loved one (or projecting it elsewhere, like the stranger who *must have* seduced the innocently unfaithful partner). **When these psychological defenses prove counterproductive, focus is placed on facilitating honest reflections and processing the corresponding mix of emotions.**

Fourth, PDT stresses everything (e.g., recurrent daydreams, peculiar jump from one topic to another, seemingly simple problems like indecisiveness or procrastination) can at times reflect something deeper. Through carefully interpreting patterns, deeper issues may be uncovered. For example, while procrastination may just be a bad habit, it may also reflect self-sabotaging to avoid losing an envious partner, or the reenactment of early life experiences where crises were constantly resolved just in time – followed by a sense of relief and accomplishment, or numerous other colorfully idiosyncratic problems

Fifth...

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