

The Contemporary Psychodynamic Developmental Perspective

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KEYWORDS

- Mentalization • Attachment • Developmental psychoanalysis
- Developmental psychopathology

KEY POINTS

- There is a shift toward a 2-person psychology approach that informs the understanding of psychopathology from a developmental perspective.
- Advance in the scientific understanding of the intersubjective experience (namely from social neuroscience) has fostered a greater deal of interdisciplinary collaboration and dialogue between developmental psychoanalysis and other fields.
- Attachment theory provides the opportunity for empiric and clinical knowledge to meet and integrate into more cohesive and systemic intervention for children and families.

THE PSYCHODYNAMIC DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE: PAST AND PRESENT

A developmental perspective has been part of psychoanalytic theory and clinical thinking since its inception. Freud's "Three essays on sexuality" (1905) outlined his theory of psychosexual phases, introduced the idea of a staged developmental ontogeny for libidinal change and orientation and set the scene for what was to be a continuous reworking and evolution of his ideas in this area. Clinical experience, and later close observation of children in the war nurseries, shaped the theories that Freud, Anna Freud, and their followers put forward. Early on, the theoretical formulations were also affected by prevailing concepts and then-current notions from fields such as the physical sciences and neurology.¹ However, Freud's 1895 project seeking a unitary conception of mind and brain was suspended prematurely as a result of the primitive state of neuroscience at the time. This early turning away from the influence of other disciplines and a heavy reliance on insights from clinical practice and clinical intuition guided the evolution of psychodynamic theory and its applications during most of the 20th century. This departure from integration with other disciplines also may have contributed to the prevalent perception of psychoanalysis as not adhering to a scientific method for advancement of the field and for not possessing a robust evidence base.

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Abbreviations: PSYCHODYNAMIC DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE	
AAI	Adult Attachment Interview
CPP	Child-Parent Psychotherapy
MBT-A	Mentalization Based Therapy - Adolescents
MBTG-A	Mentalization Based Group Therapy for Adolescents
PIP	Parent Infant Project

Contemporary psychoanalytic writers in the developmental tradition have identified this turning away from the influence of other disciplines, and almost exclusive reliance on clinical observation and intuition, as a threat to the healthy evolution and survival of a psychodynamic approach to developmental psychopathology in the 21st century.² As a result, they emphasize the need for a radical reappraisal of psychoanalysis' epistemic framework in response to the current trends emerging from developmental psychopathology.

Developmental psychopathology focuses on the interplay between normality and pathology. Emphasizing a developmental framework for comprehending adaptation and maladaptation across the life course, developmental psychopathology pursues multiple levels of analysis and a multidomain approach to mapping development.³⁻⁵ Many of the basic tenets guiding developmental psychopathology are present in the work of pioneers of the psychodynamic developmental tradition, such as Anna Freud. Anna Freud struggled with the complex metapsychological question: What moves development along, and is it inherently progressive and linear?⁶ It could be argued that in essence, all of the psychoanalytic developmental theories are grounded in these basic tenets: understanding the interplay between normality and pathology; mapping multiple domains developing simultaneously; and taking a life course perspective.

The contemporary psychodynamic developmental perspective has set itself the challenging and ambitious agenda of becoming a more explicitly integrative, developmental psychopathological model of development from early infancy on through old age. By *integrative*, we mean several things:

1. Integration of earlier psychoanalytic theories with contemporary ideas
2. Integration of the many disciplines that study development: biology, neurology, cognitive and affective neuroscience, psychology, and education
3. Focusing not solely on an individual but also on the many systems that the individual functions within

Contemporary psychodynamic perspectives on development are also systemic, that is, understanding development as an interaction between endowment and environment (all social support systems surrounding the child). This theoretical shift departs from a classical view in which development is enshrined in stages and regression and psychosexual fixation are interpreted concretely, and moves toward a view of development as a consequence of the continuous interaction between the person (in terms of psychology and endowment) and the environment (in terms of the relationship between the person and social systems) To predict development under this transactional model, one must examine a system of interactional exchanges and continual restructuring of individual psychology based on these exchanges.⁷

Advances in the fields of cognitive and social neuroscience and genetics have informed this progression toward a more flexible, integrative, and systemic developmental psychodynamic approach. In this context, psychoanalytic theory, as pointed out by Fonagy and colleagues (2002),⁸ provides an essential counterweight to advances in neuroscience and molecular genetics, preventing the oversimplification of the study of mental disorders and normative lifespan development.

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