Conflict Theory; Re-thinking the Foundations.

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Conflict theory and its evolution into a construct wherein all mental activity is understood as compromise formation was and to a significant degree continues to be the guiding principle of psychoanalysis in the United States.

This paper is divided into 2 parts; the first attempts to present conflict theory as it was originally conceived, its modern iterations and the problems inherent in these formulations. In the second section I tentatively propose an alternative conceptualization of certain tenets underlying psychoanalytic theory in general, including, but not limited to conflict theory. The second part is both provisional and overly schematic since each of the issues raised needs significantly more elaboration and development and which I hope can be done over time. Its main point is to suggest that the fundamental tenets of psychoanalysis, as elaborated by Freud, rely on early twentieth century neurophysiology and therefore are in need of re-conceptualization in light of recent findings.

From its inception, psychoanalytic theory has been about unconscious conflict. In “Studies on Hysteria,” Freud (1893-1895) writes, “The patient’s ego had been approached by an idea which proved incompatible, which provoked on the part of the ego a repelling force of which the purpose was defense against the incompatible idea.” While the understanding of the adversaries involved in conflict changed and the concept of anxiety was repeatedly modified, unconscious psychic conflict remained the central most important element of psychoanalytic theory. Similarly, the proposition that a symptom is the outcome of the struggle between opposing urges and the establishment of a compromise dates back to the early days of Freud’s discoveries. As I have said elsewhere, the Interpretation of Dreams (1900) essentially laid the foundations of our theory, and dreams were considered to be all about conflict, defense and compromise.

The foundations of modern neuroscience were also being erected at the same time, based on the research of Golgi, Cajal and others, but since neuronal studies were still at a very early stage, Freud soon recognized that his ideas about the mind could not yet find any correspondence in the brain. Faced with this dilemma, he created a virtual model that could explain mental life, much as researchers do today when they create computer simulation models.

By creating this virtual apparatus, Freud (1923) found a way to study all aspects of mentation and freed himself from reliance on a neuroscience too inadequate to explain his findings. It is important to recognize, however, that since he began with a theory of unconscious conflict, the new apparatus had to be designed to provide a virtual explanatory model for a mind in conflict --both a mind in the throes of mental anguish as well as a mind in relative peace. This ingenious tool, which he described in the “Ego and the Id” eventually became known as the structural theory, and its three parts became a major force in propelling psychoanalytic theory forward. This theory was designed to explain not only symptoms but also character traits, pathology and normality, and it has
persisted with well-known elaborations, explanations, and modifications for soon to be ninety years. This is how Freud described it in the summer of 1938: “We assume that mental life is the function of an apparatus to which we ascribe the characteristics of being extended in space and of being made up of several portions--- which we imagine, that is, as resembling a telescope or microscope or something of the kind. We have arrived at our knowledge of this psychical apparatus by studying the individual development of human beings. To the oldest of these psychical provinces or agencies we give the name of id etc.”

Following the publication of the “Ego and the Id”, much of the focus was on the ego, and Anna Freud’s “Mechanisms of Defense,” Waelder’s “Principle of Multiple Function” and Hartman’s delineation of ego functions contributed to this trend. The “id” did not get the same level of attention, and as the following quote from Freud (1938) shows, it is indeed a problematic concept: “There can be no question but that the libido has somatic sources, that it streams to the ego from various organs and parts of the body. This is most clearly seen in the case of that portion of the libido which, from its instinctual aim, is described as sexual excitation. The most prominent parts of the body from which this libido arises are known by the name of ‘erotogenic zones,’ though in fact the whole body is an erotogenic zone of this kind. The greater part of what we know about Eros- that is to say, about its exponent, the libido- has been gained from a study of the sexual function, which, indeed, on the prevailing view, even if not according to our theory, coincides with Eros. We have been able to form a picture of the way in which the sexual urge, which is destined to exercise a decisive influence on our life, gradually develops out of successive contributions from a number of component instincts, which represent particular erotogenic zones.”

Many thorny theoretical issues are raised by these concepts, such as the relationship of Eros to libido, the parts of the body from which libido arises (i.e., the source of libido), and the whole body as erotogenic zone and as a result the id is a much harder agency to define than its companion the ego. Similar conceptual difficulties surround the issue of the relationship of the id to the unconscious. The ego, on the other hand, with its multitude of functions and defenses, and noted capacity for adaptation is a much simpler and easier to understand concept.

From the nineteen sixties onwards, many in the US and specially at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute developed and refined our psychoanalytic understanding of ego functioning, including Abend, Arlow, Beres, Joseph, Porder, Rangell, Richards, Willick and others. In particular, Charles Brenner can be credited for having tirelessly pursued the goal of clarifying and streamlining the structural theory, through a series of papers and books written over a span of over forty years. His modifications became modern conflict theory, a term which Brenner credits Abend for proposing.

Brenner’s work went through many phases as it evolved. As with most thinkers, evidence of his later work can be found in his earlier work, but I will focus primarily on his later works wherein he synthesized all his earlier revisions and offered a concise summary of his thinking. One can already see how he was moving away from Freud’s
original conceptualization of conflict in his 1982 book, “The Mind in Conflict” (p.7&)
when he states, “It is un-pleasure that is responsible for defense and conflict in
connection with infantile instinctual wishes and further, that this un-pleasure is of two
kinds, anxiety and what I have called depressive affect.” In 2008, Brenner’s
modifications went even further, and he ultimately concluded that structural theory is
misleading and wrong and that instead, mental functioning can best be understood by
postulating that the mind is “an organ that constantly tries to gain pleasure and to avoid
un-pleasure” and that as part of this process, “compromise formations are created.” By
proposing that the structural theory was no longer valid, Brenner thus eliminated the need
for the concept of signal anxiety, which had been so central to the evolution of Freud’s
theory of affect. He summarized his new theory in the following way: “The pertinent
part of that theory, (i.e., modern conflict theory) is the conclusion that the mind is
motivated by a need, desire, or tendency to achieve pleasure and to avoid un-pleasure.
What is of overriding importance is whether a wish is pleasurable or un-pleasurable. In
fact, as observation has shown there are wishes that are both..... According to modern
contlict theory, the wishes involved (both aggressive and sexual) cover the whole range
of infantile sexuality; the calamities involved include the whole range of un-pleasurable
affects, whatever they may be in each individual case; and the defenses include whatever
the mind is capable of that can serve the purpose of reducing the un-pleasurable affects.”
Brenner did not differ from Freud, however, with regard to the latter’s view that
aggressive wishes are pleasurable, and in his 2009 memoir in the Psychoanalytic
Quarterly, he reiterated that “part of psychoanalytic theory is the conclusion that both
men and women enjoy killing and maiming each other.”

Central to Brenner’s ideas about un-pleasure is the conceptualization of both anxiety and
depressive affect as having two components, a sensation and a thought. As he stated in
The Mind in Conflict, “Thus any affect includes (a) sensations of pleasure, of un-
pleasure, or of a mixture of the two plus (b) thoughts, memories, wishes, fears—in a
word, ideas. Ideas and sensation together constitute an affect as a psychological
phenomenon. Whatever the affect, either the pleasure-unpleasure, the ideas, or both may
be wholly or partly unconscious or otherwise warded off.”

Until at least 2007, he maintained the view that anxiety and depressive affect were the
two un-pleasures to be avoided, but as noted above, by 2009, specially in his interview in
the Psychoanalytic Quarterly with Robert Michels, Brenner appeared to be leaning
towards an even broader definition of un-pleasure.

By distilling much of psychoanalytic theory into this formula, Brenner attempted to
circumvent many thorny issues that have plagued our field. While his formula has a great
deal of clinical usefulness, it unfortunately leaves many questions unanswered. As
indicated, Freud’s ingenious solution for dealing with the inadequacy of the neurobiology
of his day was the creation of a virtual entity that came to be known as the structural
theory. By doing so, he attempted to free the mind from brain constraints and to develop
the science of psychoanalysis. He was never completely able to free himself from
neurobiology, however, nor was he able to solve many of the problems inherent in his
new theory, especially questions concerning the instinctual drives and the id, as is
manifest in his struggles over the problem of masochism and therapeutic impasses, as well as his speculations about the Nirvana Principle and the Death Drive.

Perhaps partially as a result of the difficulty in defining the id without a concrete tie to biology, the study of the ego took center stage, and gradually, the ego acquired what can only be called a mind of its own. It made decisions, controlled emotions, and activated the motor system. It was both the seat of signal anxiety, as well as the agency responsible for defense; a theoretically conflicted conundrum. In other words, the ego became the executive agent. The superego similarly became the punishing agent, and guilt, that extremely poorly defined jumble of thoughts and feelings, acquired an important role in directing behavior. As for the id, especially with Brenner, it gradually became replaced by wish, which was described as a drive derivative, thereby losing its original connection to the body in any significant way. The brain was nowhere to be seen.

There were negative consequences of this theoretical shift. As the focal point of psychoanalytic inquiry moved from the id and the drives with their biological underpinnings to an almost exclusive ego-centric field of study, especially after Freud’s death, higher cognitive functions such as thinking, reasoning, and judgment took center stage. (Since the focus of this paper is Modern Conflict Theory, I am leaving aside for the moment any consideration of Object Relations Theory or Relational Theory, to which some of these comments would also apply). In the years after 1923, our theory moved gradually more towards subjective epistemology and away from an objective epistemology, where opinions as opposed to objective scientific evidence prevailed. As the difficult “Id” became the easier to understand “wish” and the superego became the experience-near fear of punishment, it seemed reasonable, and some might say even inevitable, that the structural theory—which had its usefulness—should be dismissed. This is precisely what Brenner accomplished with his modern conflict theory, although even he attempted somewhat faintly to bring the brain back into psychoanalysis late in his career.

As much as it dealt creatively with some theoretical dilemmas, modern conflict theory does not satisfactorily resolve some important questions. First, there is the question of the nature of the data upon which these conclusions are based. Since psychoanalytic data is what the patient says and as such is a product of higher cognitive functions, then Brenner’s conceptualization of affect as something that is comprised of a sensation and a thought or idea appears reasonably well-grounded on clinical evidence. This ignores, however, pertinent evidence from neuro-scientific (Ledoux, Panksepp and others) and developmental studies, which clearly demonstrates that anxiety and sexual arousal, as well as many un-pleasures and pleasures, can be aroused without any involvement from the higher systems of the brain—in other words, with no conscious or unconscious thought. This does not mean that any thought cannot be made to attach itself to an emotion or even to cause an emotion, but rather, that emotion is primarily independent of thought. Among the most obvious example of this phenomenon in everyday life is sexual
arousal occurring in the absence of cognition. An equally compelling example is the delight of babies in situations of visual, tactile or motor stimulation at a time when self-reflective consciousness is not developed. Various experimental conditions have also shown how the fear and anxiety circuits can be activated without conscious awareness.

Another problem inherent both in Freud’s original conflict theory as well as in Brenner’s modified version is even more fundamental and therefore much more difficult to resolve. This vexing issue centers around the central tenet of psychoanalytic theory that pleasure and un-pleasure underlie all mental events, namely “the pleasure-unpleasure principle.” Given the state of scientific knowledge and the centrality of a simple theory of homeostasis at the time that Freud was writing, the idea that pleasure and unpleasure were inextricably paired in an on-going reciprocal attempt to achieve mental equilibrium seemed natural and intuitive. In early psychoanalysis, if the tension of the drives increased, it led to un-pleasure and when these same tensions were discharged, it led to pleasure. Even though this early view was later significantly modified, it needs to be recognized that the principle itself is a product of its time, namely of very broad generalizations about mental functioning which were modeled after a similarly rudimentary physiology and neuro-physiology. Based on his clinical findings, even Freud had problems with the principle, which he later set about to resolve in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” as well as in works such as “The Economic Problem of Masochism” and “Analysis Terminable and Interminable.”

In the light of current scientific knowledge, it is easy for us to recognize that pleasure and un-pleasure are complex feelings, emotions, and sensations that are distinct and not necessarily related. An oscillating U-shaped tube view of psychic balance based on poorly delineated principles called pleasure and un-pleasure is no longer valid. Obviously, this does not mean that there is no relationship at all between pleasure or un-pleasure, but there are numerous instances where pleasure and un-pleasure are present simultaneously and other situations where unpleasure motivates one to seek pleasure, thus underscoring the complexity of the relationship between the two.

It is important to remember that pain, fear and anxiety and especially anticipatory anxiety are warning systems that inform us of danger or threat to bodily integrity; these systems are protective and are essential not only for survival, but also for the maintenance of health. As counter-intuitive as it may seem on the face of it, we need un-pleasure in order to have pleasure, for without our fear and anxiety systems, we would be at risk, exposed to harm and unable to attain pleasure. With this in mind, Brenner’s (2008) (715) assertion that “the mind is motivated by a need, desire, or tendency to achieve pleasure and to avoid un-pleasure”… and that “at a certain age rather early in childhood and from then on, both normal and pathological mental functioning are largely motivated by both needs acting together” can only be seen as both too global and overly simplified. Importantly, in my reading of Brenner, I am inclined to think that he confuses motive and outcome; the fact that some acts or impulses can be pleasurable does not explain their fundamental raison-d’etre. In fact, his version of the functioning of the mind relies too
heavily on the verbal report of patients—which, though important, is an incomplete
source of data when the problem is understanding the fundamental principles governing
the mind and the brain.

One final word on this subject, specifically about what are, on the one hand, broad and
overly generalized definitions of pleasure and unpleasure, and, on the other, definitions
that are overly limited and limiting. For example, when Freud and Brenner refer to
pleasure this denotes sexual and aggressive pleasure, but there other pleasures needed for
survival. Furthermore, sexual pleasure itself is a complex phenomenon involving desire,
attraction, responsiveness, sexual behavior such as foreplay, sexual intercourse or
stimulation and orgasm all of which involve complex hormonal and other biological
interactions. Similar comments apply to aggression which I will deal with shortly.

Before leaving the subject of Modern Conflict Theory, I will say a word about Brenner’s
idea of a depressive affect. While it may seem that this is but an addition to Freud’s
conflict model, in fact, it leads to a radical revision of theory by simultaneously paving
the way for the elimination of the concept of signal anxiety and by setting the stage for
the demise of structural theory. While the evidence suggests that there are emotional
circuits involved in feelings of sadness or depression, when one considers both clinical
psychoanalytic as well as scientific data, depressive affect as defined by Brenner may be
no more than higher cortical functions eliciting a negative emotion to inhibit actions that
could lead to anxiety.

Given all the contradictions, inconsistencies and incompatibilities with scientific data that
plague the pleasure-unpleasure principle, perhaps it is time to re-think the entire concept
of conflict. From the beginning, Freud saw unconscious conflict in his consulting room,
and he created a theory of the mind to explain his data, based on the knowledge and
epistemological models available to him at the time, but today it may be possible to re-
conceptualize the mechanisms that govern conscious and unconscious mental
functioning.

In this brief section, I plan to raise some questions about a few more well-established
tenets of psychoanalytic theory—mainly aggression and the unconscious—as well as to
make a few brief comments on fear versus anxiety, libido, and the superego.

The idea of aggression as a drive, as a component of conflict, and as a source of pleasure
begins with Freud. But neither Freud nor those who followed attempted to more clearly
delineate and differentiate the various types of aggression we encounter in our everyday
life (Panksepp, Pfaff). What we term aggression includes a heterogeneous admixture of
behaviors, including self protection or protection of offspring on the one hand and
murder, torture, maiming, on the other. In between these extremes, we also lump
together diverse actions such as boxing, wrestling, fighting, humiliating, ridiculing,
revenge, rage, playful teasing, as well as feelings such as anger, frustration, irritation,
and annoyance under the rubric of aggression. My discussion of this concept cannot be
comprehensive or nuanced enough, given all the complexities involved; instead, I will
focus on those aspects of aggression crucial to Freud’s last theory of anxiety.
As he developed the concept, signal anxiety warns of danger and mobilizes defense. This is what he had to say in “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety”:
“A defense against an unwelcome internal process will be modeled upon the defense adopted against an external stimulus, that the ego wards off internal and external dangers alike along similar lines.” Furthermore, he continues, just as when faced with real danger the “organism has recourse to attempts at flight,” when faced with internal danger it has recourse to defense. As compelling and logical as this argument may be, it omits any consideration of the fight response, which is an equally important and ubiquitous reaction to danger. Any theory that does not include the role for aggression in self-preservation and preservation of offspring, kin, territory and so forth is partial and incomplete and in some way compromises the robustness of its explanatory powers.

Furthermore, for aggression to be elicited, there must be a threat, namely a danger from which we need to protect ourselves. Understood in this light, it cannot be the emergence of aggression that causes anxiety, but rather it is fear or anxiety --which are indicators or warning signals of danger-- that arouse aggression. Naturally, when such aggression is aroused, there immediately and often, instantaneously, follows an evaluation about its appropriateness, its intensity, and its object. For survival, however, it is imperative that this evaluation be subsequent to its arousal. In sum, what I am proposing here is that the actual situation is the opposite of the usual way this is understood in psychoanalysis; namely, that danger elicits fear or anxiety that then arouses aggression. While the suppression of aggression needs to occur at some point or in some instances, it is not the first step. More fundamentally, aggression is not aroused spontaneously due to drive pressure which then leads the ego to signal danger and to mobilize defenses, but instead, faced with danger, real or imaginary, the person adopts a psychological posture of self-protection and mobilizes aggression to defend itself. In this context, danger could take various forms, including pain, frustration and distress. This change in theory obviously has theoretical and clinical implications that due to time constraints, I can only briefly mention shortly.

Another important and related idea expounded by Freud, Brenner and others is that aggression leads to pleasure. I believe the evidence for this is very weak; if anything, clinical experience reveals that a person in a state of anger or rage is a person in a state of stress and discomfort. If one accepts the notion that aggression is a source of pleasure, one must explain how it is that humanity has survived. Once again, the distinction needs to be made between the role of aggression and the rewards that may be needed in order to achieve the desired goals.

In conceptualizing aggression as a response to danger that is indicated by fear or anxiety, I have not made a very strong distinction between fear and anxiety. In psychoanalytic theory we often find the two used interchangeably. The usual ways the two are differentiated, for example as involving internal danger vs external danger, or as being sustained vs phasic (Davis et al, (2009) are unsatisfactory. At the present time, we do not have an adequate understanding of the distinctions between the two, neither in psychoanalysis nor in neuroscience. Definitional problems not withstanding, for the purpose of what I have proposed regarding aggression it does not matter whether the
danger is external or internal, that is to say real or fantasized or imagined, nor whether it is phasic or sustained; neither is it of any consequence whether we call it fear or anxiety.

In proposing a modification of our familiar way of thinking about aggression and anxiety, the question arises regarding the relationship between anxiety and sexuality. How does it happen that sexuality and fear become connected? From a biological perspective, it makes no sense for sexuality to be a source of fear. As a significant source of pleasure as well as a requirement for the creation of offspring and propagation of the species, it would appear logical that mainly reward – i.e., pleasure-- should be important regarding sexuality. However, it is obvious that fear, aggression and sexuality would have some overlapping circuits. In a given situation, a decision must be made: is it safe for sexual behavior or is it dangerous? In the latter case, aggression needs to be mobilized. Interestingly, recent research with rodents has shown that when faced with an unknown female, the activation of sexual circuits rather than increasing fear has a dampening effect on the fear and aggression circuits. A somewhat related observation was made by Hartmann 1946 when, using the vocabulary of that time he stated, “the unmodified aggressive impulse threatens the existence of the object and the investment of the object libido acts as its protection.” This suggests a more complex and nuanced relationship between anxiety and sexuality than our usual psychoanalytic one and adds the notion that activation of sexual circuits can be used to decrease the anxiety and concomitant aggressive circuits. It also suggests a re-appraisal of the notion of castration anxiety which Brenner, in fact, appeared to be thinking about in his last paper when he spoke about bodily injury and inferiority rather than castration.

By speaking about sexuality in this way, I am narrowing the focus much more than Freud did when he wrote about libido and eros. I think aggregating all the various properties we attribute to libido or eros is inaccurate, and that the notion of “sexual” is used indiscriminately in current psychoanalytic theorizing. When we speak of the libidinal investment of a mother in her baby, for example, we acknowledge the sensuous aspects of that relationship without deeming it sexual. It would be more useful to keep the sexual for the sexual and to study the other properties of mind that pertain to relationships and to the need for others separately, while being mindful that there are always interactions between these various properties. Attachment, is one such property, but there are others. From a brain perspective, the play of hormones should also be different when we are talking about sexual motivation versus attachment, and I believe there is evidence that supports this assumption.

Both the notion of the dynamic unconscious and the concept of the superego also require reconsideration in light of my review of conflict theory. Classical psychoanalysis has assembled together under one agency morality, prohibition, and punishment. As heir to the Oedipus complex and through a process of identification, the superego becomes the agency that threatens punishment for wrong-doing. The most significant instances of doing wrong involve hurting others or transgressing certain sexual taboos. While the concept of the superego has had its usefulness, I think the time has come to differentiate and delineate the many attributes or properties we lump together under this rubric. Morality and the capacity to tell right from wrong, such as has been
derived from biblical injunctions is one area in need of study. Areas that involve others, however, as many of the prohibitive acts do, are dependent on other capacities that have nothing to do with punishment. Empathy, which is one such domain that has received a great deal of attention in recent times. Research on theory of mind has focused on the development of empathy in the child around the age of three. ([The terrible twos occurs prior to this stage, and most parents or close observers have surely witnessed the nonchalance with which a frustrated child expresses its aggression prior to the age of three (+ or -).]]) After that age and over time, with maturity, the child becomes better able to control such aggressive actions in response to frustration, aided in large part by the social environment, which includes parents, nursery teachers, older siblings etc. Empathy is also central in this maturational process, and as Simon Baron-Cohen, Donald Pfaff and others have described, empathy works to control the expression of aggression towards others in situation when one feels threatened. In this sense, the action of empathy in modulating fear and thus controlling destructive wishes is a part of the function Freud attributed to fear of superego. This does not to imply that the fear of punishment is not an important deterrent in controlling aggression, but it is mostly learned and not infrequently works on a conscious level. Guilt, could also benefit from a re-assessment, but it will have to wait another occasion.

The concept of a dynamic unconscious, which is at the heart of psychoanalytic theory, is also in need of careful reappraisal. As Dr. Margaret Gilmore cohesively argued in her recent review, Freud’s views on the unconscious continually evolved, as he moved from the topographic, to the economic and to the dynamic model of mental functioning. Research on memory and memory systems, on emotions, on motivation and on epigenetics has begun to make it possible to study unconscious mental processing. A review of the neuroscientific findings on the cognitive unconscious demonstrates how much neuroscientific studies have progressed in this area since Freud’s early delineation of the preconscious and the unconscious. The area of interest for psychoanalysts, however, is the dynamic unconscious.

The concept of the dynamic unconscious goes hand in hand with the notion of conflict, which has been central to Freud’s view of the mind. In fact, it is conflict that is responsible for what we call unconscious in the psychoanalytic sense. But, if, we were to view the mind without using the lens of conflict, the unconscious might look different. This point was driven home to me recently as I reviewed the progression of various interpretations I made during an analysis and came to recognize that we lump together a number of observations that are not comparable. For example, when we interpret a displacement or a condensation in a dream or when we interpret the transference, we are pointing out an unconscious process which, if the interpretation is correct, will typically be easily recognized by the analysand. On the other hand, interpreting passive wishes towards the father or sexual longings for the mother or the father are not always that easily recognized. Does this mean that we have different levels in the dynamic unconscious? And how can we understand a situation when we see all types of evidence that point to a beating fantasy, but an actual fantasy does not materialize?

These questions struck me recently when I tried to present the dynamic unconscious to a group of neuro-biologists. In attempting to clarify the problems for myself, I came up
with a proposal that to me seemed to satisfy the requirement of explaining psychoanalytic clinical data. From the moment of birth and even in utero, the infant and its genes are in an active, reciprocal relationship with the environment, and this interaction contributes to the development of the mind. A multitude of physiological and psychological factors constitute the infant’s experience of the world, with its total reliance on its caretakers being amongst the most compelling and salient. It is beyond my competence to describe the highly complex nature of experience for a developing infant and child, but it has been well-established that even genetically determined responses are going to be greatly influenced by the ways in which the developing child’s needs are satisfied. These needs are not only about eating and sleeping, but include the whole gamut of his interactions with every aspect of his surroundings, amongst which, recent findings suggest a role for epigenetic factors.

Though by no means comprehensive or exhaustive, any list of the biological and experiential factors critical to the unfolding of the developing mind would include the following considerations:

The infant is born with certain characteristics which include genetic and temperamental factors, which are influenced by the conditions in the womb.

Following birth, the relationship with the environment and the care-takers assumes a key role. (Greenacre 1941, 2010), David Taylor (2010). Here are a number of issues to consider:

a. Management of the infant’s needs including the inevitable distresses, which has long term effect as the infant/child goes through various maturational stages. How distress and then later anxiety are modulated at each moment of life has an impact on the future. Among factors important and needed from the care-takers are consistency, emotional involvement and tuning, attachment and investment, and motor and mental stimulation.

b. Psycho-sexual development. Freud and later others postulated that the developing infant progresses through a number of stages, the familial oral, anal and phallic-oedipal, latency as well as separation and individuation. Child observational studies appear to buttress their views on these stages, which are distinguished from but in relationship with the stages of cognitive development postulated by Piaget, Baron–Cohen and others.

Keeping in mind the complexity of these interactions, I propose that the totality of experiences through these stages, in interaction with the factors mentioned above, create templates, maps, networks or, using a popular term, algorithms that influence the way the person thinks and feels and reacts in the future. That is to say, the individual mind is compromised of these maps, which include both explicit and implicit memories and emotions. I am suggesting that much of what we call dynamic unconscious and unconscious fantasies are these algorithms which determine how the world is perceived and reacted to, both consciously and unconsciously. The evolutionary imperatives such as self-protection, survival, creation of offspring and their protection in order to protect the species are of overriding importance in the creation of these maps or algorithms, and
it is these biological mandates rather than pleasure-un-pleasure that rule the mind at its most basic level. Experience, including genetic interactions, then shapes these maps which persist to some degree and are reinforced by later experiences until examined, as it is done in psychoanalysis.

This view of the unconscious has the advantage of creating continuity with the so-called cognitive unconscious, and to my mind, does not in any way change the important discoveries of psychoanalysis regarding childhood sexuality. It does, however, solve some of the thorny problems in the concept of repression and the dynamic unconscious, which become evident as soon as one tries to examine their coherence. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, it removes the notion of opposing forces that is so central to the notion of conflict. It should be kept in mind, however, that once higher cognitive functions are fully available, contradictory ideas and opposing views become part of the way the conscious mind works, which has lead to the assumption that this is how the whole mind operates. With the inclusion of the lower emotional and non-conscious processing into the mix, however, a conflict model as it has been traditionally formulated does not stand up to scrutiny.

I will stop here with the discussion of the unconscious, fully acknowledging the tentative nature of my proposals. I recognize that I have touched on many issues and am not sure if I have made my points cogently enough, so perhaps a synopsis and consideration of unanswered questions is in order.

1. Freud saw conflict from the beginning of his clinical observations, and the theories he proposed all served the purpose of explaining conflict.
2. Aggression does not arise spontaneously, requiring defense, rather it is a response to a perception of danger. Therefore, aggression does not arouse anxiety but is aroused by fear and anxiety.
3. The aspect of aggression we have most been interested in is not a source of pleasure.
4. The pleasure-un-pleasure principle represents a way of looking at the mind that relies on late nineteenth, early twentieth physiology and does not adequately account for the working of the mind. As a corollary to this, the notion of signal anxiety which is closely related to this principle is no longer adequate to explain mental phenomena.
5. The superego as it is currently understood encompasses too many properties which need to be addressed and understood separately.
6. Finally, we need to revisit our concept of the dynamic unconscious and I have offered an alternative.

Obviously, the changes I am suggesting have clinical implications. With respect to the suggested modification of the role of aggression, I can see two useful applications here, one involves the understanding of sado-masochism in all its various manifestations and the other, borderline pathologies. Analysis and therapy of a number of patients with perversions has underscored for me the central role of fear and anxiety in these cases. In a 1998 paper on fetishism I asserted that what seemed essential in the use of the fetish was how the person, male or female, was able to deal with anxiety. In sado-masochism, I suggest that due to early difficulties which include the caretakers inability to modulate
the infant’s anxiety, the fear mechanism is too easily triggered, causing aggression which is then dealt with through the use of sex and other positive affects? In other words, sexual and other positive emotions are an antidote to emerging destructive impulses. As already mentioned, Hartman commented on this, and recent research in animals appears to corroborate it. Again, I must stress that I am generalizing to a degree, and that the actual sexual behaviors within a perversion should be subjected to careful analysis. However, I think that whatever the variations and the subtleties involved in each individual case, and whatever the person’s childhood experiences that contribute to the perverse staging, the underlying function of the perversion is to control aggression and destructive wishes resulting from inadequate control and modulation of anxiety circuit triggers.

Similarly, the recognition that both the aggression and the hyper-sexualization seen in borderline pathology are the result of the failure of early environmental and other factors in modulating fear and anxiety and that, consequently, these patients have a much lower threshold to feeling under threat and in danger, has consequences in the understanding and treatment of these group of patients.

My proposal regarding an alternative way of conceptualizing how the mind works also allows a way for explaining behavior that does not rely on conflict theory, as can be seen in the following example:

A patient in the early phase of her analysis responded to a comment of mine about sex by saying I was a dirty old man. Some time later, it became clear that she took a considerable pleasure in being flirtatious with much older men, always with the idea that they were dirty old men. A number of years later, after much analytic work that led to important shifts in her psychic functioning and to significant changes in her life, she was talking about her childhood and mentioned that there was only one bathroom with a tub and a shower and that sometimes when she took a bath, her father would come in and take a shower. At the time, I saw this, within a conflict model, as evidence of a lifting of repression and the remembering of experiences that had been pushed out of her consciousness. Using the algorithm or template concept, the same set of data can be understood differently. The presence of the patient’s father in the shower while she was in the tub gave rise to a series of reactions that led to the creation of a map. Those reactions may have been shame, feeling excited, feeling special, increased curiosity, and so forth, to name a few out of the universe of possibilities. These emotions were stored as implicit emotional memories, and along with whatever thoughts she may have had, contributed to creating a special unconscious map. Subsequent interactions with older men would therefore be perceived and experienced according to this map; in addition, these new experiences would strengthen and add to the pre-existing template. Memory consolidation and re-consolidation would clearly play a role in this process, as would the various emotions generated in each new version of the old situation that have been preserved as emotional memory (see Ledoux). Eventually, in the transference, these particular algorithms will be activated, leading to various fantasies about the analyst. The implicit or unconscious emotions would be the first to make their way into the transference, and then, over a period of time, the related memories would be recalled. The recollection of these unconscious memories allows for the formation of new memories within the therapeutic, interpretive and transferential context (C. Alberini
2011) which is the essence of psychoanalytic work. For this reason, I believe that even in this post-modern world, the transference provides a unique opportunity for activating these various algorithms and for their analysis, which then can allow higher mental processes to start the work of gradually altering the map.

Summary

In this paper, I have tried to avoid much talk about neuroscience and instead to argue my points using our language. Many of the suggestions I have made, however, are I believe in harmony with present-day understanding of the workings of the brain, and specific neuroscientific data underlie my still preliminary and over-generalized attempts at explaining psychoanalytic clinical data with a more contemporary neurophysiology. An increasing number of psychoanalytic clinicians do not see the potential usefulness of neuroscientific data to psychoanalysis thus expressing an important trend in modern psychoanalysis which is to move towards a purely clinical field. This trend was set in motion decades ago, when Freud severed the link with the brain and created the biologically untethered structural theory. Although there were important discoveries along the way, this uncoupling of the mind and brain has had the unfortunate consequence of creating an increasingly fragmented and fractured field, in which even the foundational discoveries of psychoanalysis are too-easily discarded. By ignoring the growing body of knowledge about how the brain works, we are left with a discipline based on opinions, without a solid scientific foundation. In a very preliminary way, I have tried to suggest that a modification of theory relying on a synchrony with modern neuroscience is possible. The task ahead for psychoanalysis and the direction of research lies in the modernization of psychoanalytic theory, taking into account contemporary neurobiology. We have an enormous data base in our possession, as well as the unique tool of observation and data collection we know as the analytic method; so-equipped, we can, and should enter into an active exchange with modern neurobiology, for the advancement of a better and more complete understanding of how the mind work. Utilizing current findings from other fields (in particular neuroscience and evolutionary theory), as incomplete and subject to revision as these findings may be, I have proposed alternate explanations of clinical data that hopefully will allow for a testing of different psychoanalytic concepts and theories and will contribute to a fruitful dialogue, both with these other fields as well as within psychoanalysis. Attempting alternate explanations of clinical data as I attempted above, based on my preliminary propositions using current findings from other fields, in particular neuroscience and evolutionary theory, incomplete and subject to revision as these may be, will allow for a testing of different psychoanalytic concepts and even theories and contribute to a fruitful dialogue with these other fields and within psychoanalysis.

References


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