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# The scientific standing of psychoanalysis

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This paper summarises the core scientific claims of psychoanalysis and rebuts the prejudice that it is not 'evidence-based'. I address the following questions. (A) How does the emotional mind work, in health and disease? (B) Therefore, what does psychoanalytic treatment aim to achieve? (C) How effective is it?

A.

As regards the workings of the emotional mind, our three core claims are the following.

(1) *The human infant is not a blank slate like all other species; we are born with innate needs. These needs ('demands upon the mind to perform work', as Freud called them, his 'id') are felt and expressed as emotions. The basic emotions trigger instinctual behaviours, which are innate action plans that we perform in order to meet our needs (e.g. cry, search, freeze, flee, attack). Universal agreement about the number of innate needs in the human brain has not been achieved, but mainstream taxonomies (e.g. Panksepp, 1998) include the following:*

- We need to engage with the world – since all our biological appetites (including bodily needs) can only be met there. This is a *foraging* or *seeking* or 'wanting' instinct. It is felt as interest, curiosity and the like. (It coincides roughly but not completely with Freud's concept of 'libido'.)
- We need to find sexual partners. This is felt as *lust*. This instinct is sexually dimorphic (on average) but male and female inclinations exist in both genders.
- We need to escape dangerous situations. This is *fear*.

- We need to destroy frustrating objects (things that get between us and satisfaction of our needs). This is *rage*.
- We need to attach to caregivers (those who look after us). Separation from attachment figures is felt not as fear but as panic, and loss of them is felt as despair. (The whole of 'attachment theory' relates to vicissitudes of this need.)
- We need to care for and nurture others, especially our offspring. This is the so-called 'maternal instinct', but it exists (to varying degrees) in both genders.
- We need to play. This is not as frivolous as it appears: play is the medium through which social hierarchies are formed ('pecking order') and in-group and out-group boundaries maintained.

The (upper brain-stem and limbic) anatomy and chemistry of the basic emotions is well understood (see Panksepp, 1998 for a review).

(2) *The main task of mental development is to learn how to meet our needs in the world. We do not learn for its own sake; we do so in order to establish optimal action plans to meet our needs in a given environment. (This is what Freud called 'ego' development.)*

This is necessary because innate action programmes have to be reconciled with actual experiences. Evolution predicts how we should behave in, say, dangerous situations, but it cannot predict all possible dangers (e.g. electrical sockets): each individual has to learn what to fear. This typically happens during critical periods in early childhood, when we are not best equipped to deal with the fact that innate action plans often conflict with one another (e.g. attachment v. rage, curiosity v. fear). We therefore need to learn compromises, and we must find indirect ways of meeting our needs. This often involves substituting

<sup>1</sup>Here I am focusing on emotional needs – which are felt as separation distress, rage, etc. – not bodily drives – which are felt as hunger, thirst, etc. – or sensory affects – which are felt as pain, disgust, etc. (See Panksepp, 1998.) The way in which I use the term 'action plans' in this article is synonymous with the use of the term 'predilections' in contemporary computational neuroscience.

# Standing Of Psychoanalysis

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