

Commentary on “Trust comes from a sense of feeling one's self understood by another mind”: An interview with Peter Fonagy

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Commentary

Issues that had been controversial a decade ago in psychoanalytic psychotherapy are mostly no longer so. There is for example little discussion now about the advantages or disadvantages of a relational approach: the overwhelming evidence favouring an interpersonal frame of reference for both development and adult functioning is generally accepted. Similarly, the large number of studies showing psychodynamic psychotherapy to be efficacious in a range of diagnostic conditions has multiplied and the defenders of a narrowly defined view of evidence-based practice have been by and large exposed as ideologues. However we are no clearer about why psychotherapy is effective and speculations concerning “common factors” raise as many questions as they answer. Therapeutic alliance may indeed be predictive of the outcome of therapy, but is this to do with attachment or some other aspect of social cognitive function?

At UCL and the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families we have been preoccupied with the issue of treatment mechanisms for many years. Initially we provided a model proposing improvements in the capacity to mentalize as a central mechanism shared by a wide range of treatment approaches. Further reflection and empirical and clinical evidence have led us to doubt the sufficiency of this assumption. We have all seen many patients whose capacity to mentalize benefitted from psychanalytic psychotherapy without corresponding improvement in their social-emotional functioning. It seems then that we should be more specific about where mentalizing becomes most relevant to intra- and interpersonal adjustment. At the same time, two other emerging lines of thinking have influenced our work. Firstly, there is widespread acceptance of the futility of diagnostic groupings based on symptomatology alone (Caspi, 2018) and of the possibility of a common

vulnerability for psychopathology, which has powerful resonances with the classical psychoanalytic model of neurosis (Jones, 1946). Secondly, evolutionary biologists have increasingly moved away from relatively simplistic genetic models of human and animal behaviour in terms of fixed action patterns, and are increasingly focussing on general tendencies that are indeed genetically driven but highlight how natural selection has favoured flexibility in relation to the environment – flexibility in terms of learning about and adapting to changing environments.

Bringing these two areas of development together, we are increasingly thinking of mental disorder, or the vulnerability to mental disorder, as a shortcoming in this flexibility which social learning normally provides. Rigidity and the experience of social isolation are key hallmarks of mental disorder. Seeing this general vulnerability to psychopathology as closely linked to the absence of trust in the knowledge that we naturally acquire through social interaction may account for both the apparent rigidity and the sense of loneliness which motivate and characterise mental disorder. More accurately stated, the natural stance of epistemic vigilance is persistently maintained and creates the general vulnerability to respond suboptimally to life changes and challenges. The life histories of many of our patients more than amply justify the persistence of vigilance, and perhaps help explain the powerful association between childhood adversity and adult mental disorder. These are just some of the ideas that the inspired interview by Robbie Duschinsky helped us elaborate. At this point it is important to highlight that although Peter was the spokesperson for the group, the ideas are owned by at least four of us, and probably more: Elizabeth Allison, Patrick Luyten, Chloe Campbell and Peter Fonagy.

References

Caspi, A. (2018). All for one and one for all: Mental disorders in one dimension. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 175(9), 831-844.

Jones, E. (1946). A Valedictory Address. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 27, 7-12.