

## **Toward a Unified Psychoanalytic Theory: Foundations in a Revised and Expanded Ego Psychology**

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### **Introduction**

This paper is based on my book entitled *Toward a Unified Psychoanalytic Theory: Foundations in a Revised and Expanded Ego Psychology* (Eagle, 2021), and sort of completes a circle for me from the time I spent at the NYU *Research Center for Mental Health* as a young man, to my current book on ego psychology late in my life. The dominant psychoanalytic *ethos* at the *Research Center* was an ego psychology perspective along with receptivity to cross-fertilization between psychoanalysis and ideas and findings from non-psychoanalytic sources. I return to that *ethos* in my book. I should probably not say “return” because, as I think about it, one foot in psychological research and theory and one foot in psychoanalysis have been at the center of much of my work.

### **Main claim of the book**

The main claim I make in my book is that a corrected and revised ego psychology constitutes the strongest foundation for a unified psychoanalytic theory of the mind, one that is best suited to integrate relevant findings from non-psychoanalytic sources, is best able to address and integrate the phenomena of primary interest to other psychoanalytic schools, and perhaps, surprisingly, one that places of the “personal element”, “the I”, at the center of psychological life. I will return to this last idea later in the paper. Although I have a chapter on treatment in the book, its main focus is on a psychoanalytic theory of the mind. Here, I agree with Freud (1927, p. 254) that psychoanalysis’ main claim on posterity is as a theory of the mind rather than as a form of treatment. However, a revised ego psychology also has important clinical implications which I discuss in the book.

### **How idea for book came about**

Why ego psychology? Let me begin by addressing this question by describing how the idea for this book came about. I had been looking into research on individual differences in inhibitory capacity, including the ability to delay gratification, as well as in other so-called executive functions. At a certain point, the links between this work and Freud’s (1895 [1950]) conceptualization of the ego in the *Project* as a structure whose primary function is inhibition became evident. As we know, the basic ideas of the *Project* were restated in psychological language in Freud’s later writings.

Central to the Freudian theory of the mind is the conception of the ego as a structure and a set of processes that intervene between impulse and discharge. According to Freudian theory, in the normal course of events development proceeds from an early direct pathway from impulse to immediate discharge to the increasing emergence of processes that intervene between impulse and

discharge. These intervening processes, which are inhibitory in nature, enable a mediated pathway from desire to meaningful action. They allow us to function in a complex world that requires delay, planning, awareness of means-end relations, and anticipation of consequences through assessment of safety and danger. In short, as stated by Hartmann (1939), the ego is understood as “an organ of adaptation” (see also Hartmann, 1948 p. 379, 1950 p. 79). In an important sense, the appearance of these intervening processes marks the emergence of a person.

It seemed to me that not only could an ego psychology perspective potentially assimilate and integrate relevant findings from non-psychoanalytic sources, but given the conception of the ego as a superordinate organizing function, ego psychology could also address and integrate the main issues and concerns of different psychoanalytic schools that have a more limited perspective and range. The conception of the ego as a superordinate organizing structure is made clear in Freud’s (1923) description of it as a “coherent organization of mental processes” to which “consciousness is attached”, and as a “mental agency that controls the approaches to motility and that supervises all its own constituent processes” (p. 17). Finally, and especially important, ego psychology locates the “personal element” at the center of psychological life, where it was always meant to be. For all these reasons, I believe that an ego psychology perspective could serve as the strongest foundation for a unified psychoanalytic theory of the mind. However, there are limitations and shortcomings in ego psychology that need to be addressed in order for this to be possible. I address these shortcomings with the aim of pointing to the need for corrections and revisions.

There is still another answer to the question of why ego psychology. Its waning influence has, unfortunately, meant a relative loss of interest on the part of the psychoanalytic community in some fundamental aspects of the mind addressed by ego psychology – for example, reality-testing, defense, capacity to delay, affect regulation, and degree of integration of various aspects of the personality. These fundamental aspects of mental functioning should not be lost to psychoanalytic theory. Such a loss diminishes its range and importance.

### **Criticisms of ego psychology**

Of the criticisms that have been directed toward ego psychology, some are more justified, some less justified. A good source for learning about some of these criticisms, primarily, in my view, the unjustified ones, is Martin Bergmann’s (2000) book, *The Hartmann Era*. I begin with what I believe is a major unjustified criticism of ego psychology and then turn to some warranted criticisms that point to deficiencies of ego psychology that clearly require correctives and revisions.

#### *Clinical theory versus metapsychology*

A context in which ego psychology was subject to intense criticism was the debate in the 1960s and 1970s on clinical theory *versus* metapsychology. A number of critics, including Gill (1976) and George S. Klein (1976), argued that the core of psychoanalysis lay in its clinical theory and that psychoanalytic theory should be limited to the discourse of purposes, meanings, intentions, and so on. Insofar as the ego psychology of Hartmann and Anna Freud employed metapsychological language, the critique of metapsychology was directed toward ego psychology. For example, according to G.S. Klein (1969-70), “proceeding in this direction, [by which he meant explanation in terms of “mechanism” rather than in terms of “purpose”], ego psychology becomes indistinguishable from traditional academic psychology (...) it is certainly not psychoanalytic” (p. 522). G.S. Klein (1969-70) called for psychoanalysis to “shed all pretenses of offering a nonteleological, mechanistic picture of ego processes” (p. 524; see also G.S. Klein, 1976, p. 160). A similar position was taken by many other psychoanalytic commentators.

Although this position may be defensible in the context of ongoing treatment, a question that arises is whether any psychoanalytic theory, including its clinical theory, which purports to explain human behavior, can be justifiably limited solely to discourse in terms of aims, purposes, and motives. As the philosopher Black (1967) writes: “As soon as reasons for actions have been provided, an inquiring mind will want to press on to questions about the provenance and etiology of such reasons” (p. 656). In other words, although appeal to the agent’s reasons and motives as explanation may suffice in the context of everyday interaction and the clinical situation, at a deeper level, reasons and motives are phenomena that require explanation themselves. It is also important to note that although the specific metapsychology of Freudian theory and ego psychology may be of little explanatory value, given its lack of empirical referents, it does not follow that one should eschew any attempt at searching for deeper levels of explanation. In short, this critique of ego psychology seems unwarranted.

I turn now to other criticisms of ego psychology that are warranted in that they point to deficiencies that need to be addressed in a revised and expanded ego psychology.

#### *The relative autonomy of object relations from drives*

Although Hartmann formulated the relative autonomy of ego functions from drives, he did not posit a similar autonomy of object relations from drives. That would constitute too radical a break with Freudian theory, in particular, its conception of the relationship between the object and drives. This step was left to others, mainly object relations theorists such as Balint (1937, 1952), who wrote about “primary object love”, and Fairbairn (1952), who wrote that “libido is primarily object-seeking rather than pleasure seeking” (p. 82). One should also include Bowlby’s (1969) proposal that attachment is linked to an autonomous instinctual system and not a derivative of other instinctual systems. It is worth noting that a similar debate was taking place in academic psychology, one product of which was Harlow’s (1958) classic experiment on the wire and terry cloth surrogate mothers, the main purpose of which was to refute the theory that the mother’s role in drive reduction is the primary factor in the infant-mother bond.

#### *The failure to recognize the vital role of the object relational milieu in the development of ego functions*

Ego psychology’s neglect of object relations is also seen in its failure to adequately recognize the vital role of the object relational milieu in the development of ego functions. In his reference to an “average expectable environment”, Hartmann (1939) essentially put on hold the issue of the influence of different environments, including their object relational aspects, on ego development. The incorporation of findings in this area is a vital task for the project of a revised and expanded ego psychology. These findings include the impact on ego development of a wide range of object relational factors, including maternal responsiveness, peer and sibling relationships, and cultural and socio-economic factors as they are object relationally implemented. Let me provide an example or two.

There is evidence that trust in a particular person, as well as generalized trust, is associated with greater delay of gratification (Ma *et al.*, 2018). Also, simply a gentle touch on the shoulder facilitates delay of gratification. We know that, as Bowlby (1988) noted, the capacity to explore – certainly an ego function – which is critical for the child’s development of necessary knowledge and skills is strongly influenced by the availability of a secure base. Not only do toddlers literally explore a greater area and with less anxiety when mother is physically present compared to when she is absent, but they also explore more and more comfortably when mother is simply physically present as compared to when she is present, but engaged in reading a newspaper (Sorce & Emde

(1981). Even a photograph of mother facilitates exploration (Passman & Longeway, 1982). The evidence that object relational conditions exert a strong influence on the development ego functioning needs to be incorporated into a revised ego psychology.

*Ego psychology does not include interpersonal and social understanding as a fundamental ego function*

A central deficiency of current ego psychology is its failure to adequately address the capacity for interpersonal and social understanding as a fundamental ego function. In view of the fact that we are social creatures, it is remarkable that, as a theory of how the mind works, psychoanalytic theory, including ego psychology, does not have an adequate theory of the processes involved in our *routine*, quotidian understanding of each other. There is a large and complex theoretical and research literature on the processes involved in intersubjective and social understanding that would certainly need to be integrated into an adequate psychoanalytic theory of the nature of the mind. There appears to be general agreement that, paralleling the fast and slow thinking identified by Kahneman (2011) and others, there are two systems, 1 and 2, implicated in interpersonal understanding, one fast, implicit, automatic and reflexive, and the other slow, deliberative, inferential, and reflective.

Much of the research on system 1 focuses on the role of the mirror neuron system in observing another's actions, emotional facial expressions, and experience of pain. Although the mirror neuron system is activated during observation of a motor act, it leads only to rudimentary and covert rather than overt motor behavior. This suggests a mechanism that inhibits full-fledged imitation. An implication of this formulation is that were inhibitory mechanisms not present or impaired, full-fledged overt imitation would occur. And, indeed, there is evidence in support of this hypothesis. One source of such evidence is the presence of automatic overt quasi-imitative behavior in infancy prior to the development of inhibitory mechanisms; another source of evidence is the presence of overt automatic imitation in adults with frontal lobe damage. Luria (1966) observed that patients with frontal lobe damage automatically imitated every action they observed, a condition he referred to as "echopraxia"; Lhermitte, Pillon & Serdaru (1986) refer to "obstinate imitative behavior", that is, an urge to imitate every observed action. Darwin (1872) had already described people with certain brain diseases as showing "echo signs" (p. 355), that is, imitating everything they perceive.

My former teacher Kurt Goldstein (1934) reported that, if given a comb or glass, frontal lobe patients could not refrain from respectively, combing their hair or drinking (a phenomenon Goldstein referred to as stimulus-boundedness). So, whereas in intact individuals the perception of a glass or comb would trigger only a rudimentary motor response, in brain damaged individuals the motor response is a full-fledged overt action. In other words, there is a failure of inhibition.

As for infancy, Lepage & Théoret (2007) propose that the imitative behavior seen in infants is essentially the product of what they refer to as "uninhibited perception". As they put it, "the newborn *performs* his perception" (p. 520). They propose that, over time, "the child learns to refrain from acting out the automatic mechanism that links perception to execution" (p. 520). The term "uninhibited perception" employed by Lepage & Théoret (2007, p. 521) suggests that the automatic quasi-imitative behavior observed in infancy is not so much imitation (it is certainly not intentional imitation), but rather the consequence of a relatively direct and automatic pathway from "perception to execution" of action due to the relative absence of a mediating inhibitory process between the perception and the motor behavior. Note the degree to which Lepage & Théoret's (2007) formulation strikingly parallels Freud's account of the direct pathway between impulse and discharge prior to the development of an intervening inhibitory ego structure.

There are implications in the above set of findings regarding interpersonal understanding that should be made explicit. Put very simply, unmediated overt imitative behavior by itself is not conducive to understanding another. This becomes somewhat clearer in considering the role of empathy in interpersonal understanding. Posner & Rothbart (2000) suggest that there are different forms of empathy, one of which can be described, broadly speaking, as “I feel what you feel”, which may be largely underlain by the automatic reactive system; and the other of which can be described as “I can imaginatively put myself in your shoes and understand what you feel”, which may involve not only system 1, but also greater recruitment of the deliberative control system. One of my students, Deborah L. Posner (unpublished dissertation) found that participants who were high on anxious attachment were also high on an empathy scale that stresses the tendency to feel what others are feeling (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972), a phenomenon that in extreme form is akin to a contagion effect. Participants who showed secure attachment were high on an empathy scale that taps what one might call cognitive empathy, that is, “the cognitive or imaginative apprehension of another’s condition or state of mind” (Hogan, 1969, p. 307). Interestingly, the two measures of empathy were not significantly correlated with each other. There is a good deal of research on correlates of personal distress reaction versus concern for the other reaction in observing another in distress. The findings generally demonstrate that the personal distress reaction is predictive of avoidance of the person in distress, whereas the concern for the other reaction is predictive of helping behavior.

#### *Psychoanalysis needs an adequate theory of affects*

In 1953 Rapaport wrote: “We do not possess a systematic statement of the psychoanalytic theory of affects” (p. 476). This is true not only of Freudian theory and of ego psychology, but also of post-Freudian psychoanalytic schools. For example, the terms “affect” and “emotion” do not appear in the index of Kohut’s (1984) *How does analysis cure?* or Mitchell’s (1988) *Relational concepts in psychoanalysis*.

#### *The appraisal function of affect and affect regulation*

In what Rapaport (1953) refers to as Phase 3 of Freud’s theory of affects, Freud takes steps toward an adequate theory of affects, at least the affect of anxiety. In *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety* Freud (1925 [1926]) introduces the important idea of the *appraisal* function of affect, and in doing so recognizes the experience of affect and its regulation as ego functions. As Freud (1938 [1940]) writes, “the ego is governed by considerations of safety (...). It [the ego] makes use of the sensations of anxiety as a signal to give a warning of dangers that threaten its integrity” (p. 199).

#### *The motivational primacy of affects*

Despite this important step, Freud’s formulation of affects continues to be linked to its metapsychological concepts of the pleasure principle understood in terms of build-up and discharge of quantities of excitation. Hence, despite recognition of the importance of affects, Freud continued to accord motivational primacy to discharge of excitation, in particular discharge of excitation related to drives. When, however, the pleasure principle is freed from its metapsychological links, the motivational primacy of affects becomes apparent. As far back as 1945 Fenichel wrote that “in the last analysis, any defense is a defense against *affects*” (p. 161, *italic added*). And in 1981 Sandler wrote that the emphasis on gratification of instinctual drives needs to be replaced with the recognition that affects constitute the primary motivational factor in behavior (See also Lichtenberg, 1989).

## **An ego psychology perspective on the nature of psychopathology**

I turn now to implications of an ego psychology perspective for conceptions of psychopathology. In the last few years, a number of papers have appeared in which it is proposed that underlying a wide range of psychopathology is a general dimension – labelled the “p factor” – a concept analogous to the “g factor” in assessments of intelligence (Caspi & Moffitt, 2018). What makes the proposal of a “p factor” especially relevant in the present context is its parallel to what, from a psychoanalytic perspective, could be viewed as a general dimension of ego impairment expressed in different domains and that underlie different expressions of psychopathology. Indeed, Caspi & Moffitt (2018) note that the idea of a general factor of psychopathology was anticipated by Ernest Jones in his 1946 Valedictory address to the *British Psychoanalytical Society*. Jones writes that “there may well be an innate factor akin to the General Intelligence G, the nature of which is still remains to elucidate, but which may be of cardinal importance in the final endeavour to master the deepest infantile anxieties, to tolerate painful ego-dystonic impulses or affects and so to attain the balanced mentality that is our ideal” (p. 10). He further describes the general factor as “the capacity to endure the non-gratification of a wish, (...) to retain the stimulating affects of an afferent impulse without immediate discharging them in an efferent direction” (p. 10).

As Caspi & Moffitt (2018) observe, Jones is suggesting that “poor impulse control over affects” which, they note, “subsumes a variety of deficits in response inhibition” (p. 835) and is a core factor in a wide range of psychopathology. They also cite much longitudinal research in support of this idea. In short, one can translate Caspi and Moffitt’s formulations into psychoanalytic language as stating that deficits in ego functioning, in particular, in emotional regulation and response inhibition, are at the center of a wide range of psychopathology. I also want to note that many of the findings in this area can be seen as elaborations and empirical investigations of Freud’s crucial insight regarding capacity for inhibition as a core ego function. Although there is much research on relative failure of inhibition, interestingly, there are very few studies on *excessive* inhibition. From an ego psychology perspective, what is adaptive is not inhibition per se, but ego *flexibility*, that is, a capacity for inhibition as well as for disinhibition.

### **Implications of ego psychology for treatment: “Where id was, there shall ego be”**

An obvious implication of ego psychology for psychoanalytic treatment is that however therapeutic change comes about – via insight, corrective emotional experience (Alexander, 1946), empathic understanding, and so on – enhancement of ego functions is a core aspect of positive therapeutic outcome. Instead of pursuing this issue, in the time that remains I want to focus on the implications of Freud’s (1932-33) “where id was, there shall ego be” (p. 80), the full meaning of which is obscured by the English translation of the original German. These implications go beyond the treatment context. When unpacked, it goes to the heart of an ego psychology perspective.

Let me begin by noting that neither Freud nor Hartmann wrote about the ego, ego psychology, or ego functions. Rather, they wrote about “*Das Ich*”, “*Ich psychologie*”, and “*Ich functionen*”, that is, respectively, to “the I”, “I psychology”, and “I functions”. Thus, quite ironically, despite the austere and experience-distant language that Hartmann employs, he places “the I”, that is, the personal element, at the center of psychological functioning. When one translates the original German “*Wo es war, soll ich werden*” literally into English, it reads “where it was, there shall I become” (Brandt, 1966). This translation can be more freely understood as “where impersonal it was, there shall personal I be (or become)”; and even more freely as “where experience of drivenness was, there shall a sense of agency be”. Notably, these translations do not limit the impersonal “it” to instinctual drives. The impersonal “it” can include any set of mental contents or

potential experiences which, because they are appraised as threatening to the stability and integrity of the individual, are rendered as an ego-alien, impersonal “it” (See Eagle, 1984).

In the literal translation of “where id was, there shall ego be”, the goal of treatment becomes the transformation and enhanced integration of the hitherto ego-alien “it” into the personal “I”. Such integration not only expands the range of one’s experiences and sense of agency, but also makes it more likely that the structure of a personal “I” will more adequately represent a wider range of one’s vital needs and desires. Indeed, one can think of the evolutionary emergence of a personal I at the center of subjective experience as an adaptive development that enhances the likelihood of one’s vital needs being represented in experience and therefore, more likely to be met. This is still another way of understanding Hartmann’s (1939) positing of the ego as an organ of adaptation.

One can also think of the I as a “waystation” through which various factors, including biological and psychological needs and unconscious processes, exert their influence on us. That is, they do so not the way a computer program directs an automaton, but rather through exerting an influence on “the I”, that is, on what I desire, I prefer, I attend to, I wish, and what I want and intend to do. The concept of a waystation is meant to capture the idea that with the development of an “I”, we are less subject to influences that proceed directly from impulse to action. Rather, these influences are mediated by the intervening structure of “the I”. So, note that we have completed the circle by returning to Freud’s (1895) conception of the ego as an intervening inhibitory structure and to Hartmann’s conception of the as an “organ of adaptation”.

The capacity for intervening processes and functions such as planning, thinking, anticipating consequences, desiring, and so on already implies the emergence of an ‘I’ as the center of subjective experience. As Walsh (1967) writes in his summary of Kant’s philosophical formulations, the existence of an ‘I’ “is the ultimate condition for experience, in the sense of being the logical subject of experience or the point to which all experience relates” (p. 315). Further, whatever the nature of the factors that influence lived experiences and whatever the underlying explanatory account, the fact is that it is one’s lived experiences that make one’s life meaningful. It is these lived experiences that are the primary phenomena that need to be accounted for in any adequate theory of the mind. In that sense, contrary to Freud’s endorsement of Groddeck’s aphorism that we are lived by our id, we are in fact lived by our ego. That is, although id forces may influence one’s life, in relatively intact functioning it does not do so in a direct and unmediated way – we are not programmed automatons. They influence us, in large part, through the intervening and mediating experiences of ‘I want’, ‘I desire’, and so on.

Let me sum up. My main claim is that due to its superordinate organizing status, its ability to address the interests and concerns of other psychoanalytic schools, its ability to integrate findings from other disciplines, and above all, its placement of the “personal element”, the I, at the center of the personality, a revised ego psychology is best suited to serve as a foundation for a unified psychoanalytic theory of the mind.

**Abstract.** My main claim is that a corrected, revised and expanded ego psychology constitutes the strongest foundation for a unified psychoanalytic theory of the mind, as well as for integrating relevant findings from other disciplines. I demonstrate that the areas in which current ego psychology requires correction, revision, and expansion include recognition of the role of object relations as a matrix for the development of ego functions; the relative autonomy of object relations from drives and an adequate account of the nature of interpersonal understanding; an adequate theory of affects, including recognition of the motivational primacy of affects. I also discuss the implications of a revised ego psychology for a conception of psychopathology and approach to treatment. And finally and importantly, I try to show that even from the perspective of Freudian theory, the overriding goal of treatment, as expressed in *Wo es war, soll ich werden*, is at least as much the expansion and enrichment of “the I”, that is, of subjective experience as the acquisition of insight and self-knowledge.

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